

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background of the Study**

Domestic violence affects men and women of all ages, races, religions, and incomes. However due to the “secrecy” of domestic violence, it is often a hidden social problem. The “invisibility” of the problem is largely attributed to the belief that it is a private family matter, which should not be made known to outsiders. This problem is not confined only to Malaysia but is a world-wide concern. In 1994, the World Bank compiled a study on domestic violence experienced by women in 35 countries. The results indicated that one quarter to one half of women in the countries studied had been physically beaten by their partners (Heise, Pitanguy, & Germaine, 1994). It is estimated that one in every three women worldwide are victims of intimate partner violence (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999; Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002; Seager, 2009).

Domestic violence has a long history but it was only “uncovered” in the 1970s when the women’s movement highlighted the problems and demanded that it should be addressed. In Malaysia, the Domestic Violence Act (DVA) was only implemented in June 1996, after much lobbying by women’s groups. Prior to its implementation, victims of domestic abuse had little legal protection. The implementation of this act has been described as having a “powerful symbolic value as it is a clear indication of society’s abhorrence of the abuse.” (Herbert, 1997, p. 5). However, Mohd. Shahrizad, (1996) rightfully asserted that “laws are limited in impact and cannot be carried out effectively in isolation from the social attitudes and policies” (p. 105). She recommended that the attitude of friends, family members and professionals be changed,

as it is this attitude of ignorance and insensitivity that serves at present to keep the victims locked in their shame and isolation.

In Malaysia, a study concluded that an estimated 39 percent of Malaysian women have been abused by their partners (Abdullah, Raj-Hashim, & Schmitt, 1995). Another study by Herbert (1997) indicated that even after almost twenty years during which various movements had tried to eradicate gender violence, violence against women in Malaysia appeared to be growing, both in frequency and severity. Because of the hidden nature of the problem and the lack of systematic reporting across the country, the actual incidence of domestic violence is difficult to determine.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Domestic violence occurs in all countries, rich or poor, developed or developing, with no regard to caste, creed, color, social status, wealth, urban or rural residence, or the ages of victim and aggressor. Malaysia is no exception to the problem of domestic violence. The available data reveals that there has been an increase in reports relating to wife battering over the past few years. Statistical records from Polis Diraja Malaysia (2010) indicated that the reported cases of violence have increased from 2,555 cases in 2003 to 3,643 cases in 2009. This near 30 percent increase in the number of violence cases reported is a significant increase that warrants notice. Foley (2003) saw the increase in reported cases as an indicator of women's "awareness of their right to be free from violence" (p. 131).

The high number of battered women as indicated by the data shows the seriousness of the problem and it should be realized that the number of victims dealt with by the police statistics is only the tip of the ice-berg of the overall number of women being abused in Malaysia (Mohd. Shahrizad, 1996). Bearing in mind that there

are still many unreported cases of violence in our society, this would mean that many are still suffering in silence. Many people still consider domestic violence to be a private matter and they believe that what happens in the home should stay in the home. However, the increase in the reported cases does indicate that women are developing an awareness of their right to be free from violence.

Shipway (2004) cited the following reasons for under-reporting: “(1). Fear of further or escalating violence should the victim report an incident; (2). Hopes that the relationship can be salvaged; (3). Mistrust of agencies; and, (4). Lack of knowledge about what most agencies could do to help” (p. 5). Furthermore, only physical or sexual assaults are recognized as domestic violence by law, and only those reported by the victim are recorded in the statistics by Polis Diraja Malaysia (PDRM). Those who do not report and those who suffered emotional, psychological and financial abuse do not appear in any record. Not only are they hidden by not appearing in the statistics, they are also hidden from family, friends, and other social networks.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that is embedded in culture and interwoven with economic, social, and political issues (Anderson, 2007; Barnett, 2000, 2001; Davis & Taylor, 2006; Kearney, 2001; Nagae & Dancy, 2010). Very little research has been conducted on intimate partner violence among Malaysians. As a result little is known about IPV within marriage, the factors maintaining IPV, and how women deal with it.

In 1990, in a study on domestic violence, in-depth interviews were carried out with 60 battered women, questionnaires were distributed and interviews carried out with police personnel in three states, hospital staff in two states, and legal personnel from Muslim and Civil legal agencies, along with a national probability sample of Peninsular Malaysia implemented by Survey Research Malaysia. The study estimated that 39

percent of Malaysian women were physically beaten by their husbands, but only a very small proportion made it into police reports (Abdullah, Raj-Hashim & Schmitt, 1992). In a study initiated by the Accident and Emergency Unit of Kuala Lumpur General Hospital, 186 battered women seeking hospital services from February to July 1993 were interviewed. The study revealed a lack of referrals (called 'networking'), insufficient emergency accommodation, and inadequate hospital management of battered women cases (Abu Hassan Asaari, 1993).

Abdullah, Raj-Hashim and Schmitt (1995) interviewed doctors from the Accident and Emergency Departments of government hospitals in Kuala Lumpur. The doctors interviewed estimated that they saw between one battered woman per day up to three to four women per week. In an effort to help the battered women, in 1996, the Ministry of Health, Malaysia directed all state and district hospitals to set up the One Stop Crisis Centre for victims of domestic violence in the Accident and Emergency department, where they can seek medical treatment and obtain other form of necessary assistance such as legal, welfare, counseling or shelter, all within the vicinity of the hospital. The first One Stop Crisis Center was established in the University Hospital (UMMC) in 1986, as a response to the anti-violence against women campaign staged by women's organizations in the preceding year. It was after ten years of campaign that the Ministry of Health directed the Accident and Emergency department to step out such center in all district and state hospital.

It is a service which is characterized by an integrated and coordinated teamwork of multi-sector and interagency network for the management of domestic violence, rape, sexual abuse and child abuse. Basically, it is a victim centered management place because officers from all relevant agencies will come to provide assistance once they are called. Previously, a victim would need to go to the hospital to be examined, then

sent to the police station to make a report or vice versa. And then back to the hospital if treatment is necessary. Those requiring counseling services would have to go to yet another agency. She would have to tell her story over and over again. In the One Stop Crisis Centre, besides receiving medical treatment, they also benefit from the assistance provided by the medical social workers as well as the police stationed there. Non-governmental organization would be called in to provide support and counseling for the victim as well.

Most of the micro studies on battered women done locally asked “why women returned to their husbands after having left for shelter or other resources and/or why they remained in a violent marriage for so long. Reasons given by the women for returning to their spouses and remaining in the relationship were more or less the same. They did it for the sake of the children; because of economic dependence; their inability to cope with the status of being a single mother; or, because of a sense of obligation to keep the family together (Chin, Ahmad & Ong, 1988; Chopyak & Abdullah, 1986). Chin et al (1998) found that apart from the hospital, the battered women mostly sought help from outside the family at agencies or from friends. Little research in Malaysia has focused on talking to the women who leave permanently with a focus on the factors that helped them to leave. A significant number of intimate partner violence studies have focused on the USA and many interventions were based on the North American model). However, there is a danger in this approach as the experience of IPV may be different across countries due to cultural, economic, and political differences.

Often when we hear of domestic violence, the most common questions that we ask are “Why does she stay on?” and “Why doesn’t she leave?” Facing the incredible danger of intimate partner violence, the question is not ‘why women do not leave their abuser’, but instead ‘how do women who are in abusive relationships find the courage

to leave' and 'how will they sustain themselves once they leave'. Elizabeth (2003) has argued that separation is a complex process and cannot be confined just to the "stay/leave construct". One needs to see the decisions of the women in staying and leaving as a process rather than a single act. Furthermore, one must recognize leaving as a choice rather than as a better way out. Barnett (2000) commented that, on average, women left and returned five times before permanently ending the abusive relationship.

As a counselor, I have counseled women who faced violence in marriage, and, as a child, I have seen close relatives being beaten by their husbands. Besides, almost daily, I hear in the counseling room or read in the newspaper stories of women being beaten by their husbands or being psychologically or sexually abused by the men who profess to love them. I also have often wondered why abused women remain in such abusive relationships. Why do they not leave? As I have done more reading in this area, I have come to realize that it is not easy to just leave due to the complexity of the emotions involved in a relationship. Kirkwood (1993) has described it as a "web" of entrapment used by abusive men to entrap their partners. I have realized that leaving is a process and not a single act. For Malaysian women there is also a cultural barrier to overcome as Asian culture clearly prefers one to maintain family unity at all costs; to pull the family apart regardless of the reason is not encouraged (Foley, 2003).

Moreover, for many Asian women, their self-esteem and the esteem accorded by others are based upon their marital status (Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narr, & Weintraub, 2005; Montalvo-Liendo, 2009). The stigma of being divorced or separated has very grave consequences. The reasons are complex and may never be fully understood, but the outcome of the study proposed would give information enabling counselors to identify the resources that sustain the women who choose to leave so that we then learn from them how we can best support them. Currently absent from the Malaysian

literature are studies that allow women to tell their stories in a way that gives voice to their experiences of leaving abusive relationships and what factors contributed to their decision to leave. We need to examine the experience of Malaysian women so that contextualized intervention strategies can be developed and applied.

Women who choose leaving the marital home as a preferred way of living a violence-free life are not making an easy choice; as Foley (2003) has clearly pointed out, family has a central place in Malaysian society and “there is a strong reluctance to threaten this institution in any way” (p. 135). By making leaving a choice, the women must struggle through the decision and must have the necessary support to see them through the leaving process. Using a feminist lens, this study focus on the survivors of intimate partner violence, who have made leaving their abusive partner a preferred choice in life. It looks at the process they went through; and, the resources that enabled them to stay out permanently. This is a phenomenological inquiry into the lives of women; into their lived experience of intimate partner violence; and, into the process they experienced in leaving such a relationship.

I not only see leaving an abusive relationship as both a choice and a process but also view staying out of abusive relationships as a choice and a process. I concur with Liang et al. (2005) that helpers need to view “domestic violence as a complex phenomenon that is subjectively experienced by each woman and is thus affected by distinct histories and values” (p. 81). Consequently, their choice to leave or to stay must be respected.

As counselors, it is important to understand and know about abuse. The best way to know the intricacies of people’s lives is talk to them personally. It is important for counselors to know more about the women who have left the abusive relationship and how they managed to stay out of the relationship. Counselors must learn from survivors

of abuse, who are willing to share their stories, in order to effectively help women who are in abusive relationships, those attempting to leave, those women who are leaving, and those who are remaining out of abusive relationships. Often, those who have left are willing to share their experience with the hope that it will help others.

All the above spurred my personal interest in the topic. So the aim of this study is to explore women's experience of leaving an abusive relationship and how they were able to overcome obstacles and utilize resources to leave. This study also allowed women to express their own opinion about what helped them leave their abusive relationships. It is my belief that women, and everyone for that matter, have a right to live an abuse-free life.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this study is to gain information from the women who have left the abusive relationship and are able to share that knowledge with women who are looking for ways to escape the violence. This study describes Malaysian women's experience of intimate partner violence and the leaving experience. As the process of telling of their experiences unfolds, it will illuminate the reasons that women leave, providing an explanation of specific aspects of the process that made a difference for the women. Thereby, it contributes to the development of a comprehensive picture of intimate partner violence among Malaysian women.

This research emphasized the actions of abused women, what they do. Rather than examine why a woman stays in an abusive relationship, the researcher looked at how she actively ends the relationship.



## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of a study is aimed at providing a tentative theory of the phenomenon that the researcher plans to investigate (Maxwell, 2005). I take a feminist stand in this thesis, meaning I share the belief that it is men's violence against women that creates and maintains men's power over women, both at an individual level as well as in society. Understanding domestic violence in the theoretical framework of gender violence reflects the reality that the overwhelming majority of its survivors who seek help from the police and support agencies and who require medical attention are women and the vast majority of its perpetrators are men (Harne & Radford, 2008). The feminist theory on violence against women is centered in a historical context of cultural and structural power imbalances between men and women. It is said that power and control are the core issues in domestic violence. Hence, I have adopted the Duluth model (Fig. 1.1), commonly known as the power and control wheel, to illustrate the dynamics of domestic violence.

The power and control wheel is an analytical model developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project, Duluth, Minnesota, USA, to illustrate the power dynamics of domestic violence and how it constitutes an overall pattern of power and control. The hub of the wheel illustrates its gendered nature, highlighting how the traditional power of male dominant society not only makes the choice to use violence more available to men than women, but it also facilitates their ability to use a range of controlling strategies rarely available to women. The examples in the wheel are illustrative, not definitive, but highlight some of the most common strategies identified. The wide range of abusive behavior men use to control their female partners includes physical and sexual assault; intimidation; emotional abuse; isolation; denying and blaming; using male-privilege; using children; and, economic sanctions.



Figure 1.1. The Duluth Model, power and control wheel. (retrieve from [www.duluth-model.org](http://www.duluth-model.org))

As in many cultures, the family is highly valued in Malaysia and strong kin relationships are emphasized. But families in Malaysia have been undergoing significant change over the course of the last 50 years, which has been accelerated by the twin forces of growing urbanization and rapid industrial expansion. However, Malaysian culture continues to emphasize patriarchal values and to reinforce traditional gender roles within the context of family (Mohd. Shahrizad, 1996). The culture

emphasizes the “macho” characteristics in males. Wives bear the sole responsibility for household chores.

Researchers have suggested that acceptance or condoning of wife battering may be rooted in traditional patriarchal cultural ideologies (Hoffman, Demo, & Edwards, 1994; Lee & Hadeed, 2009; Xu, Campbell, & Zhu, 2001; Yoshihama, 2005). Men are valued and expected to govern with great authority in all spheres of economic, social, and political life whereas women are viewed as inferior to men and must obey men in general during their lifetimes (Xu, Campbell, & Zhu, 2001). Husbands who have few resources may very well feel inadequate or threatened and may use violence to exert their power, establish control, and maintain dominance within the home (Hoffman, Demo, & Edwards, 1994).

No woman wants to be abused, and those who are abused do take an active role in attempting to reduce and end the abuse. Some stay on while others leave the relationship permanently. I subscribe to the idea that violence against women is a major social and health problem. Therefore, I came to this study with the assumption that counseling has something to offer and can somehow help the situation through research and knowledge-building, education and practice.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, two research questions are used as a guideline to obtain information pertaining to the leaving experience of women survivors. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. How did abused women arrive at the decision to leave an abusive relationship?
2. What is the experience of leaving like?

## Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the terms “violence against women” (VAW) and “intimate partner violence” (IPV) are used interchangeably. I am also using a broader definition of abuse as outlined above for the purpose of this thesis.

I take a feminist stand in this thesis, meaning I share the belief that it is men’s violence against women that creates and maintains men’s power over women, both at an individual level as well as in society.

A brief description of the other relevant terms that will be employed in the present study is as follows:

***Leaving:*** In the context of the present study, leaving refers to the phenomenon or event whereby a woman has either left the husband and is in the process of filing a divorce, or has been divorced from her husband.

***Intimate relationships:*** In the present study the term intimate relationship will refer to a long-term committed heterosexual relationship that has been sanctioned by religious, cultural, or legal authorities and in which the couple share a living space and other resources. It is acknowledged that other forms of intimate relationships do exist but because of the limited scope of the current study, these will not be considered.

***Abusive relationships:*** Although it is acknowledged that men may also be victims of spousal abuse, the term abusive relationship, in the present study, will be used to refer to the abuse of a wife by her husband.

***Women survivor:*** For the purpose of this study, women survivors are defined as women who are no longer victims of violence.

### **Significance of the Study**

This is a qualitative study of the experiences of abused women as pertaining to their leaving process, the kind of resources needed to enable them to leave permanently and the sustaining factors upon leaving. The knowledge gained can then be utilized to aid women who are trying to end a relationship. They can be given practical assistance and support using the data gleaned from those women who have already left as they too move through the process of ending the abuse in their lives.

The information gleaned from this study will be useful in many ways. Firstly, an in-depth understanding of the women's experiences of the partner abuse they endured and of the resources they relied upon for strength can help to inform the helping profession regarding what is the best way to assist those being abused. Secondly, by understanding the complexities involved in the leaving process, it may help various people (helping professionals, family members and friends), to be empathetic in helping abused women who are trying to leave the abusive relationship. Furthermore, the knowledge of sustaining factors upon leaving may improve the ability of "helpers" to provide proper support. And by knowing the resources needed to help the abused women in their leaving process, policy makers may want to consider making these resources more accessible or provide them for women who are trying to leave an abusive relationship.

Increased understanding of the dynamics involved in leaving an abusive relationship will lead toward studies that will define appropriate counseling intervention for abused women. Leaving an abusive relationship is very difficult for most women. Many abused women attempt to leave an abusive relationship unsuccessfully 5 or 6 times before they are successful (Barnett, 2000). The cost of failure to identify and intervene when violence occurs, in terms of women's suffering and the use of time and

resources, is incalculable. The long term nature of the effects of trauma, the pattern of repeated assaults by intimate partners typically means misery for the women involved.

This study also provides a means for women to tell their stories and possibly raise the consciousness of those who read their narratives as they are given a voice regarding this phenomenon. By sharing their story, it might shed light for other women who are still in an abusive relationship and help them to see an alternative way out.

It is my hope that a more thorough understanding of the complex dynamics involved in leaving an abusive relationship will enable counselors to become more receptive to the needs of the abused woman from the perspective of how these women are experiencing their realities. Only by giving a voice to these women who have actually lived through these experiences will counselors be able to relate to women's individual situations and circumstances in a way that is empathetic and responsive to the needs of women who have left as well as those who have not yet managed that journey.

Considering the brutality of the physical assaults and the debilitating emotional results of intimate partner violence, it is not difficult to see how leaving an abusive relationship can be an extremely complex and arduous challenge for a woman who has been abused. This study is motivated by a need and desire to understand how it is that some women do manage to leave the abusive relationship successfully.

It is hoped that the experiences as told by the abused women who have left can promote continuation of social activism and advocacy to heighten public awareness, raise public conscience, and generate greater understanding of the plight of women who struggle to free themselves from the grip of intimate partner violence. All this needs to translate into practical support and interventions by family, religious authorities, social welfare departments, the criminal justice system, and all other parties concerned. Knowledge is power and understanding opens up the possibility of change.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitation of this study was the focus on only participants, who were a self-selected group of women willing to be interviewed. They are predominantly from an urban area. While they are diverse in race, educational background, age and length of time out of the relationship, they certainly do not represent the full range of women's experiences. This study examined the personal encounter of these seven participants with intimate partner violence, their struggles and pain of being in an abusive relationship, the processes they went through and the resources that they relied upon to help them leave the abuser.

All seven women interviewed were in heterosexual relationships. For this reason, this research is limited in scope and unable to detail the dynamics of violent homosexual relationships.

### **Delimitations**

This is a qualitative study of seven women in their experiences of being abused in marriage. Their decisions to leave such abusive relationship are stories uniquely their own. The sustaining factors are uniquely their own, and may not be applicable to all cultures, races or situations. The fact that these experiences are unique to the few survivors of this study, prevent the findings of this study from being relevant to other populations.

The participants are drawn from only those who are married. Those women who suffered from intimate partner violence but are unmarried are not included in this study.

## **Summary**

Everyone needs to realize the vast cost of domestic violence and do their part in preventing intimate partner violence around them. We are all responsible and every bit that we chip in helps to prevent this phenomenon from worsening. It is the intent of this study to tell the survivors' stories, to investigate the process of ending the abusive relationship, how they executed this task and what and who were of help in making this process a success. The survivors' experiences can inform the community of ways they can be involved in helping and supporting individuals in their experience of being abused and also in assisting them in ending the harmful relationship in the event that they choose to do so.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Domestic violence is a dark reality that cuts across distinctions such as economic status, sexual identity, religious affiliation, and age. It is a complex and emotionally charged subject that is often swept under the carpet, labeled as a private family matter. Despite the fact that the Domestic Violence Act has been enacted in Malaysia, society generally continues to view domestic violence as a private matter. It is a complex social problem that requires the cooperation of different parties such as health, education, and law to resolve. Attitudes need to be changed so that society does not accept domestic violence, as an acceptable part of human relations.

There are five sections in this chapter. They consist of a definition of intimate partner violence (IPV), schools of thought regarding the cause of IPV, the cycle of violence and a review of research on leaving an abusive relationship and the factors affecting abused women's decision to leave.

#### **Definition of 'Violence Against Women'**

'Violence against women' needs to be seen as a social phenomenon and not a private family matter. There is a financial cost attached to violence against women in addition to the psychological, emotional, and health costs (Garcia-Moreno, Heise, Jansen, Ellsberg, & Watt, 2005; Shipway, 2004). Internationally, violence against women has been recognized as a legitimate human rights issue and a significant threat to women's health and well-being (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005). It is becoming clearer now that the definition of 'partner violence' is not limited to physical violence only; it also

includes psychological, emotional, financial, and sexual abuse (Kirkwood, 1993; Rhatigan, Moore & Street, 2005).

Rhatigan et al. (2005) commented in their reflections on partner violence that, as a result of the research over the past 20 years, our understanding of partner violence has expanded to include psychological and sexual abuse and not just physical abuse. This advancement in conceptual definitions of intimate partner violence, according to Rhatigan et al. (2005) has thus served to promote better assessment tools of partner violence and the factors relating to it. Various prevention and intervention techniques, strategies and programs have been developed based on this, although there is no empirical evidence to indicate the outcome of all these programs (Rhatigan et al., 2005).

In the United Nations Declaration on the elimination of violence against women (1993): *...the term “violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life* (UN, 1993, A/RES/48/104). It also stated that violence against women encompasses, but is not limited to, the following:

- a) *Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;*
- b) *Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution;*

- c) *Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs* (UN, 1993, A/RES/48/104).

The term is thus broad and encompasses many forms of violence occurring in different settings. But the specific kind of violence this thesis attempts to study is intimate partner violence in a heterosexual marital relationship.

Intimate partner violence here is not limited to only physical violence; it includes psychological abuse, emotional, financial, and social isolation. Kirkwood (1993) described six kinds of emotional abuse as follows:

1. Degradation. The woman is being constantly given the message that she is of lesser value through verbal abuse or being forced to perform sexual acts that contradict her will. Women may be degraded by being labeled stupid, worthless or incompetent in all that they do. Kirkwood writes that such degradation has a destructive effect on women's sense of self-worth. The women eventually allowed their abuser to determine their worth.
2. Fear. Abused women experience fear. They may be constantly worried about safety, not only that of their own but also of their children. They have to constantly be on the lookout for potential explosion of the violence. Moreover, "the unpredictability and unpreventable nature of further assaults created an atmosphere of continual danger, and thus continual anxiety and fear" (p. 49). Living in this kind of condition can be very nerve shattering for women.
3. Objectification. Objectification takes place when the woman is treated as an object rather than a human being. Ways that violent men objectified their partners are by denying the women their individuality. They were forced to change their outward appearance to conform to the abuser's liking. Excessive possessiveness, expressed through men's desire to control the women's social

network single-handedly, implies that the woman is just an object owned by man.

4. Deprivation. Kirkwood has mentioned two main forms of deprivation, namely economic and social deprivation, which in turn keeps women in the violent relationship as their material and personal resources are limited. The women were deprived of basic human needs and often have a sense of intense isolation.
5. Overburden of responsibility. Marriage ideally entails an equal responsibility. However, in abusive relationships, women find that responsibility for shared concerns weighed more on them. There was no “give and take” in the relationship and it was the women’s responsibility to maintain the relationship, to take sole responsibility for care of the children and to make ends meet.
6. Distortion of subjective reality. This kind of emotional abuse is described by Kirkwood as “the constant shedding of doubt on women’s perceptions by their abusers and [the] forceful and continual presentation of conflicting ones” (p. 56). By constantly doubting and questioning women’s subjective reality, the abusers may succeed in getting the women to mistrust their own perceptions and make them more vulnerable to their partners’ suggestions.

It is obvious that intimate partner violence goes beyond the merely physical. It may take many forms, often combining emotional, psychological, sexual, and financial abuse. Though it differs in terms of forms and severity within each relationship, it is still violence against women. It can happen to anyone, regardless of one’s social status, race, religion, and culture.

Many explanations for violence against women have been developed within a variety of disciplines such as sociology, psychology, public health, social work, as well as criminal justice (Jasinski, 2001). There is a hot debate in the field of violence within the family, which is rooted in two theoretical roots. One is concerned with the causes of violence; do they lie within the individual being psychological in nature or are they rooted in society? The second relates to whether or not violence is gendered. Johnson (1995), however, argued that these theoretical differences are due to the fact that there are two distinct forms of violence, common couple violence and patriarchal terrorism. He defined common couple violence as “one in which conflict occasionally gets ‘out of hand’ leading usually to “minor” forms of violence, and more rarely, escalating into serious, sometimes even life-threatening, forms of violence; while patriarchal terrorism is a product of patriarchal traditions of men’s right to control ‘their’ women” (p. 284).

### **Schools of Thought on Domestic Violence**

Many theories are associated with the causes of domestic violence. Some researchers focus on biological factors such as genetics or brain functioning, while others examine the socialization and cultural factors, stating that it may be learned from the culture or the family. Still others contend that it is the patriarchal structure that both maintains and promotes violence against women.

No one theory can fully explain the causes of domestic violence and also provide a reason for battered women continuing with the relationship. We need to acknowledge and accept that domestic violence has a multiplicity of causal relationships. The general consensus among researchers seems to indicate that no one theory can adequately describe the dimension and the phenomena of this problem.

## **Psychological Theories**

Early psychological theories focused on the individual characteristics of violent men and battered women. Psychological profiles of men who batter and the women who were battered were developed in the early days of research on domestic violence. Some posit that both the abuser and victim have some pathological traits (Dutton & Gondoff, 1979). The abuser tends to have low self-esteem and a great need for control while some aspect of the personalities and behavior of the battered women provokes their husbands to violence towards them; and, to some extent, it is maintained, the women enjoy the violence or else they would not remain in the relationship (Birns & Birns, 1994). However, Walker (1984) and others have contended that there is no evidence of a victim prone personality for the women. She argues that the battered women may suffer from the battered women syndrome, a label that has been used to describe a pattern of negative psychological consequences observed in many battered women. The major components of battered women syndrome include symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (including intrusive memories, flashbacks, fear, anxiety, sleep disturbance, avoidance, and hyper-vigilance) and “learned helplessness”. However, different women are affected in different ways, “depending upon a particular woman’s previous exposure to other oppressors, mental health status, available support systems, frequency and severity of the abuse, and a quality best described as the ‘hardiness’ of the individual women” (Walker, 1984, p. 134).

Walker (1979b) contended that this condition is a result of the battering, not because of a personality disorder that causes them to choose batterers as partners. Mahoney, Williams, and West (2001) also suggest that mental health problems associated with battered women, such as alcoholism and depression are a result of battering rather than a cause of battering.

One main criticism of this pathological trait is the issue of the target: why do “mentally ill” men consistently beat their wives and not their bosses? Secondly, this kind of individual level approach seems to ignore the fact that violence is embedded within social and cultural contexts. However, Jasinski (2001) pointed out the importance of profiling the batterer as it “suggests that different prevention, intervention, and efforts are necessary for different types of batterer” (p. 10).

### **Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory is also employed to explain both why men batter and why women remain in abusive relationships. Social learning theory is based on behaviorism which proposes that people model their behavior on the behavior of those around them. It proposes that the abuse is a learned behavior due to witnessing or having been a victim of abuse in their family of origin. Feminist social learning theorists argue that men learn to be violent while they are still children through the socialization process, and women learn helplessness during the course of their adult abusive relationship. A study by Roy (1977) found that 81percent of abusive men had a childhood history of violence, either as the victim of child abuse or as a witness to wife abuse. One limitation of social learning theory is that it cannot explain why only some children with early childhood exposure to violence grow up to be violent themselves.

## **Theory of Learned Helplessness**

The theory of learned helplessness developed by Seligman (1975), has been helpful in understanding how some women respond to abuse. Learned helplessness theory states that when an organism experiences situations which cannot be controlled, the motivation to respond to such repeated events will be impaired. After being conditioned, if the organism is able to make appropriate responses which do control the outcome, the organism will continue to have trouble believing that the responses are under its control.

Walker's (1979a) adaptation of "learned helplessness" proposed that women stay in abusive relationships because they eventually lose all hope in having any ability to leave, after becoming depressed and beaten down emotionally and physically. However, learned helplessness does not explain the behavior of women who stay for other reasons such as economic dependence, their realistic fear of homicide, or more simply those who are still in love and committed to their partner. It also does not explain why or how some abused women eventually do leave.

Walker (1984) used the term "learned helplessness" to discuss why women found it hard to leave an abusive relationship. It refers to the battered women's inability to either end the violence or to remove themselves from the violent relationship. The women see the abusive events as occurring without their control, and thus learn to endure the abuse (LaViolette & Barnett, 2000). Walker proposed learned helplessness as the result of the cycle of violence where it "taught" women to be helpless and passive. However, learned helplessness does not explain why and how many of the battered women do eventually leave.



## **Feminist Theory on Domestic Violence**

Feminist theory on violence against women is centered in a historical context of cultural and structural power imbalances between men and women. It is said that power and control are the core issues in domestic violence. Gordon (2000) posited that several individuals and interpersonal mechanisms interacted,

to translate societal mechanisms to the individual level, including attitude (attitudes justifying male privilege and dominance over women and rigid expectations of gender-specific behavior), socialization of males to adopt aggressive and dominant behavior in interpersonal interactions, encouragement of aggression and control over woman by peers and authority figures, lack of sanctions for violence against women by societal institutions and the modeling of violence against women either in the home (observation of domestic violence in families) or by media (p. 765).

The patriarchy structure and ideology permeates all basic social institutions such as politics, religion, education, economics, media, and the family (Hyden, 1994; Jasinski, 2001; Kirkwood, 1993). Feminist theory puts this very inequality between men and women at the root of the analysis of domestic violence.

Women's subordination is seen as a product of the patriarchal system. Under English common law, husbands had a right to "correct" their wife's behavior and they were allowed to chastise their wife with a stick no bigger than a thumb (Gelles, 1993). This is where we get the term "rule of thumb". Dobash and Dobash (1979) viewed violence as a means that men used to control their female partners. In their interviews with 109 women who had been abused, it was reported that men used tactics such as intimidation, isolation, and psychological abuse to control their partners. They stated that "in the family, the parameters of women's behaviors were set, her undifferentiated

nature reiterated, her relationships with men defined, her subordination taught, and her deviations controlled” (p. 33). Thus, Dobash and Dobash asserted that battering was a product of a system which was reflected in historical laws about male ownership and marriage, as well as current social gender roles and structures which secured the dominance of men over women.

Felix and Paz-Ingente (2003) maintained that both men and women have been conditioned to think and behave within the “patriarchy” context. Throughout history, men are taught to be aggressive, dominating and to exercise authority over women, while women are taught to be submissive, dependent upon men and to sacrifice for the family’s welfare.

Yllo (1988) notes that there are four major points to all feminist perspectives on wife abuse:

- “1. an explanatory utility of the constructs of gender and power;
2. an analysis of the family as a historically-situated social institution;
- 3.the crucial importance of understanding and validating women’s experience;
- and
4. the employment of scholarship for women” (p. 13).

She maintained that violence is the most obtrusive and convincing manner in which to control and dominate women. She asserted that even though not all men exhibit this behavior, all men do gain social control and have power over women. The stand she takes in her scholarship is for women to seek to empower women through developing theories that are centered on women rather than historical theories that tend to reduce women’s worth. Thus, it is essential that the voice of women is heard in issues relating intimately to women. Studies must be designed in a way that give “voice” to women, which allow them full expression of the range of their experiences. Kirkwood (1993)

posits that the qualitative research method addresses these problems by allowing women to tell their stories from their perspectives.

### **Theory of The Cycle of Violence**

The “cycle of violence”, first articulated by Lenore Walker (1984), became a popular explanation for domestic violence in the 1980’s. Lenore Walker, a psychologist, discovered what she calls the cycle of violence, based on the principles of intermittent reinforcement, which outlined predictable patterns of abuse in a violent relationship (Walker, 1979, 1984). In Walker’s cycle of violence theory, she describes a repeated sequence of behavior that typified a battering relationship which appears to have three distinct phases: the tension building phase, the explosion or acute battering phase followed by a honeymoon respite phase. The three phases often vary in time and intensity.

In phase 1, the tension building phase, there is a gradual escalation of tension, causing increased friction such as name calling. The tension begins to rise and there might be small but controlled incidents of violence. The batterer expresses dissatisfaction and hostility but not in an extreme form. It is characterized by male anger and frustration leading to acting out the violence. The woman is sensitive towards the abuser’s emotional changes. She attempts to calm down the batterer, doing what she thinks might please him, or at least what will not aggravate him further. She may respond by tip-toeing around him to avoid an outburst or she may begin to use techniques which had brought her success in containing the abuser’s outburst in the past. There is a feeling of “walking on egg shells,” and there can be minor battering incidents. Walker (1979) posits that “as the batterer and the battered woman sense the escalating tension, it becomes more difficult for their coping mechanism to continue

working” (p. 67), thus the explosion or acute battering occurs, which leads to phase 2 in the cycle.

Phase 2, the acute battering phase, is usually the most violent and shortest point in the cycle. In this phase, the batterer’s anger seem to be totally out of control and it is reported that he did not set out to harm the woman, only to teach her a lesson (Walker, 1979). This is the phase when the male becomes overly aggressive. The other characteristic for phase 2 is the lack of predictability and control of the kind of violence that will occur.

This phase is often followed by a honeymoon period where the batterer would be extremely loving, kind and show his genuine contrition over the abuse incident. He also showers the woman with gifts and promises that he will never do it again. In this third phase, the love bond between them is enhanced, thus giving the woman hope that her man will change. It is the honeymoon phase in a relationship that makes leaving so difficult but nobody knows how long this phase will last. As Walker (1979) has explained “before one knows it, the tension starts to build again”; little incidents begin here and there and the cycle starts again. Following the third phase, the first inevitably happens again at some point and the cycle goes on.

Walker asserts that the cycle of violence causes the victim to think less of herself, causes confusion that reduces her chances of planning escape, preoccupies her mind with self-blame and causes her to be hopeful that they can have a happy and fulfilling relationship together.

Knowledge and understanding of this cycle is important so that we can educate women about this and help them to be aware of the cycle that they go through in an abusive relationship. This cycle of false hope is literally “programmed” into the victims by their abusers. Many women never find ways to prevent them from being drawn into

the same destructive pattern. Hopefully, with an understanding of the cycle, they will have the courage to break the cycle and it will help them to see that the honeymoon stage is only a fleeting hope that they cannot afford to hang on to with their life.

### **Exchange Theory**

Exchange theory contends that predictable behavior occurs when rewards are increased and punishments are averted. Central to exchange theory is the notion that if reciprocity ends, then the interactional nature of the relationship will cease. Gelles and Cornell (1990) note that the application of exchange theory upon family interactional patterns is more complex and they contend that in some situations it is “not feasible or possible to break off interaction, even if there is not reciprocity” (p. 116). In applying this theory to abused women, there is a cost-benefits analysis that guides the abused women’s decision either to continue or cease the relationship. In other words, if the “benefits” of continuing to stay in the situation outweigh the “costs” of being abused, then the victim is more likely to stay in the situation.

### **Resource theory**

Goode (1971) was the first to apply Blood and Wolfe’s (1960) resource theory of power to explain a husband’s use of physical violence against his wife. He situated his resource theory of violence within the context of distribution of resources within society. Individuals and groups of people who have fewer resources in comparison to other members in the society are expected to experience higher levels of frustration and stress. Goode maintained that violence is a resource similar to money or personal attributes that can be used to deter unwanted actions or bring about desired behaviors. Husbands who have few resources may very well feel inadequate or threatened and may

use violence to exert their power, establish control, and maintain dominance within the home (Hoffman, Demo, & Edwards, 1994). Goode (1971) argued that the greater the resources available to an individual, the more force he or she can use, but it is less likely violence will actually be employed. Violence is viewed as the “ultimate” resource in that it is used when other resources are perceived to be insufficient or to have failed to obtain the desired response. Thus, violence seems to be the most overt and effective means of husbands’ social control over wives, when other and more subtle methods of control do not elicit submission.

### **Leaving the Abusive Relationship**

The most automatic response in hearing about intimate partner violence is, “Why does she stay? Why doesn’t she leave?” Often included in the question is a tone and attitude that seem to blame the women for staying. The common assumption in these questions is that leaving or staying is just a one point decision. However, leaving an abusive relationship is a process. Several theories/studies suggest the process involved in leaving an abusive relationship includes the steps the women take toward the realization of the abuse, toward understanding that her abuser will not change, and deciding what she needs to do to leave. The women may stay and leave many times before a final exit is made (Landenburger, 1989; Patzel, 2001; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999).

Research literature provides much evidence of leaving as being more of a process with stages that women must pass through to achieve their individual goals (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Elizabeth, 2003; Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007; Landenburger, 1989; Patzel, 2001; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). The process may take a long time and include multiple attempts before a permanent exit

takes place. Barnett (2000) has commented that, on average, women left and returned five times before a permanent exit takes place. Nevertheless, asking why women stay in abusive relationships is important for learning how best to provide proper support for women trying to leave such relationships. This is exactly what this study aims to do, not to blame victims but to find out how best to support them in their process of leaving. It is important for any helpers to listen actively to the woman, determine where she is in her leaving process, support her decisions, provides necessary information that enables her to make a decision that she is able to sustain and to make appropriate referral if needed. However, it is important that leaving must be a choice of the abused women. It should not be “forced” upon them.

Women are faced with complex choices when they are making decisions about leaving violent partners. The women seem to be caught in a Catch-22 situation. If a woman chooses to stay with her abuser, she is criticized and quite often blamed for her own victimization, but if she leaves, she is seen as uncaring and uncommitted to her husband and children. Moreover, many factors are evaluated by the abused women before they decide to leave.

These factors may include the presence of children, societal norms about marriage, attachment to the abuser, and economic constraints (Barnett, 2000, 2001; Davis & Taylor, 2006; Eisikovits & Buchbinder, 2000; Haj-Yahia & Eldar-Avidan, 2001; Koepsell, Kernic, & Holt, 2006; Merrit-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Strube & Barbour, 1984; Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999). In addition, religious factors may play a pivotal role in whether and how women leave an abusive relationship (Wang, Horne, Levitt, & Klesges, 2009). Overall, there is little understanding of the reasons for abused woman staying and little empathy for the difficult situation that they face (LaViolette & Barnett, 2000).

Based on a cross-sectional study of 30 predominantly Caucasian women who had left abusive relationships, Landenburger (1989) identified a process of entrapment in and recovery from an abusive relationship, which consists of four phases: binding, enduring, disengaging and recovering. The time these women have been out of the relationship ranged from two weeks to twenty-three years. Most had been in the relationship more than five years with 63 percent of the women reporting that they had been subject to daily abuse.

Included in the binding phase is the development of relationship and the beginnings of abuse. In this stage, the women's response is to try to make things work and appease the abuser. In the enduring phase, the women's concentration is in maintaining and remaining in the relationship because of her sense of responsibility for keeping the relationship. She tolerates the abuse and often blames herself for the abuse. Her sense of self shrinks in this stage and the woman feels as if she is leading two lives, one that is of violence and another is that of the happy and normal relationship. Then comes a time when the woman begins to distance and reclaim her sense of self, which is the disengaging phase. Women are said to disengage from the relationship when they are able to label themselves as abused and begin to take steps to seek help. They begin to identify with other abused women and label their situation as abusive prior to actually leaving. In the recovery phase, the initial ending of relationship takes place, where struggles for survival and grieving for the lost relationship set in. However, the woman remains separated from her abuser and "works at understanding the meaning of her past experiences so that she can obtain a balance in her life" (p. 221). Landenburger found that women progressively pass through these phases and ascribe meaning to their experience of abuse. She described the meanings attributed to the abuse experience from the woman's perspective from within the context of the relationship. She showed



how the characteristics of the relationship influenced a woman's perceptions and choices. Landenburger's study illuminates both intra- and inter-personal processes with respect to the process of being in an abusive relationship, getting ready to leave and leaving.

People in general tend to view leaving as an event. A study by Ulrich, however, highlighted leaving as a process, not an event. Ulrich (1991) assessed 51 formerly abused women looking at their reasons for leaving, specifically at "that time when you decided to leave the relationship," (p. 466). Almost half of the women cited personal growth as reason to leave; less than half cited personal safety or the safety of their children. "Dependency may not be a major issue for women who manage to get out, especially for those who leave 20 times or more" (p. 466). Ulrich also noted, as have others, that women may leave many times before leaving a final time. Ulrich concluded that further study is needed for women to define the process of leaving from their perspective. She recommends that "additional work is needed to define the process from the women's perspective because effective intervention will require the discovery of the types of support and the kinds of learning experiences that are meaningful to them" (p. 472). She also points out that because women leave and go back is not a reason to view intervention as meaningless.

In another study based on feminist theory, 13 survivors of abusive conjugal relationships in eastern Canada were interviewed. Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995) consequently proposed a two phase framework for leaving: "counteracting abuse and breaking free". They discovered that the central process for survivors was a reclaiming of the self. Consistent with Landenburger's (1989) findings, the process of countering abuse began when the partner initiated abuse. The woman's attempts to survive at this stage involve using tactics such as relinquishing parts of the self, minimizing abuse, and

fortifying defenses through making plans to leave. Breaking free is a time when the woman finally leaves the abuser and becomes a survivor. But it is believed that leaving takes place in diverse ways. It can be in the form of withdrawing emotionally from their partners, avoiding intimacy, purposely delaying going home and moving out for periods of time (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999).

The process of breaking free allowed women to get a feel for what it would be like to leave and what the consequences of leaving would be in terms of family, friends and the abuser. This process appeared to be a necessary step in preparing their permanent exit. Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999) consider it to be critical for helpers to remain committed to giving support even when the women may not be physically out of the relationship. Withdrawal of support at this stage would set back the leaving process.

Following up on their previous study, Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999) conducted another study grounded in a feminist perspective focusing on rural women who had left abusive relationships. They interviewed fifteen participants who had left an abusive relationship over a year ago. They found that in the process of leaving, the survivor goes through a psychological process of “reclaiming self”. Reclaiming self is a process of re-establishing the self within the wider social context. Survivors go through the following stages: “countering abuse, breaking free, not going back and moving on” (p. 116) in the process of reclaiming self. They point out that although support is important during the early stage of leaving, it is even more crucial to render support to help the women to sustain the decision to remain separated. They highlight the importance of helping survivors of abuse to make whatever resources are available to work for them and to remove any barriers that slow down their process of leaving. This study describes the complex social processes involved in not going back. The authors address the fact that “interested individuals” could and did make a difference in helping women not to go

back. They talk about the possibility of mentoring, role modeling, and “seemingly insignificant acts of caring”, along with informal guidance and running interference, as making a difference in the woman staying out.

Another study done in Sweden, using in-depth interviews with ten women who had left violent heterosexual relationships and two group interviews with volunteers and staff at women shelters in Sweden, Enander and Holmberg (2008) found three overlapping leaving processes: breaking up, becoming free, and understanding the situation or experience. Breaking up involves action, which occurs when the women gave up on the relationship and leave physically. However, leaving does not mean that they have broken the emotional ties with the abusers. Breaking free is a separate process that entails four stages: “I love him”, “I hate him”, “I feel sorry for him” and “I don’t feel anything”. Only after the woman has gone to stage 4 will the abuser’s emotional power over her be broken. However, this does not mean that his external oppression of her has ceased even though the abuser’s internal power over her has been broken. She may still have to cope with his constant threats and harassment. The third process connected to leaving is the concept of understanding. It is in this stage that the “woman defines the relationship she lives/has lived in as abusive and herself as a battered women” (Enander & Holmberg, 2008, p. 218). They proposed that women only realize that they are abused after they have left, which differs from other process studies which see leaving as a result of defining themselves as victims.

### **Factors Related to the Decision to Leave an Abusive Relationship**

Although the studies on leaving as a process focus mainly on intra- and inter-personal aspects, many have stressed the importance of external support and access to resources from their personal network and the general community (Barnett, 2000, 2001; Davis, 2006; Haj-Yahia & Eldar-Avidan, 2001; Koepsell, Kernic, & Holt, 2006; Merrit-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999).

There are many reasons believed to contribute to women remaining in abusive relationships. First, women may initially perceive the severity and frequency of the incidents as low (Gelles, 1976). Secondly, she may be economically dependent on her abuser and have no marketable skills to gain employment (Strube & Barbour, 1983). Moreover, women who depend on their husband for practical support also depend on them as sources of self-esteem, emotional support, and continuity (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983). Thirdly, she may fear his response if she were to attempt to leave him. This fear is realistic as many women are seriously injured or killed by their abuser when they attempt to leave him (Campbell, Webster, Kozol-McLain, & Block, 2003). Fourthly, she may fear losing extended family connections if she leaves him. It is common for abusers to isolate their victims physically and emotionally, and if she leaves him she will have no system of support (Walker, 1984).

Lastly, she may have religious or cultural beliefs that make it difficult to leave (Walker, 1979). The abuser may threaten to take her children away from her if she leaves him (Walker, 1994/84). She may believe that she just needs to be a better wife or mother and she may still love her abuser (Walker, 1979). She may feel sorry for him and believe it is her responsibility to help him change (Walker, 1979).

Gelles (1976) offers an explanation as to why abused women remain with their abusive partners based on the following hypotheses: First, the more abuse and neglect a woman experiences in her childhood, the greater the likelihood that she will remain with her abuser. Another factor that increases the likelihood of a woman remaining with her abuser is a lack of resources and a social network. Finally, the less severe and less frequent the violence they experience in their current relationship, the more likely a woman is to remain with her abuser.

According to Gharaibeh and Oweis (2009) countless psychosocial, economic and cultural factors affect a woman's decision to either stay on or leave an abusive relationship. They comment that "women who are more likely to remain in the relationship are believed to engage in a process of rationalization that denies the reality of the situation, the options available, the truth about the victimizer and the victimization, and the causes of the violence" (p. 377).

Patzel (2001) studied abused women's personal strengths and internal resources that help women to leave. The study is qualitative in nature, based on naturalistic inquiry posited by Lincoln and Guba. Ten women were recruited by shelter outreach. Criteria used were that the women had been out of their relationship for at least six months. The duration they have been in abusive relationships ranged from three to thirty-five years, of which five had lasted 20 years or more. Patzel contended that women journey through five phases: turning point, realization, reframing, agency and self-efficacy. During each phase, specific internal resources were utilized to enhance the process of leaving. During the turning point phase, women's strengths included knowing the limits and the setting of boundaries. The realization phase is related to the turning point phase and has either preceded or concurred with the turning point. At this stage there is a shift in cognitive awareness. Women began to attribute abuse to the

abuser, understood their own denial, rationalization and discernment. With realization and awareness, the women were able to think differently about the abuse and to define the relationship as abusive. The agency phase was seen as motivating and supporting the women to prepare for change. During this phase, internal resources such as self-education, self-expression and spirit were utilized to maintain awareness of the abuse. Finally, the women achieve self-efficacy, a form of personal strength encompassing determination, belief in one's own ability to be successful and ability to make things happen. It is this personal strength that allowed the women to act in their own best interests to leave the abusive relationship.

Ferraro and Johnson (1983) maintained that "rationalization is a way of coping with a situation in which, for either practical reason or emotional reasons, or both, a battered woman is stuck" (p. 331). They identified six catalysts that burst these rationalizations and cause women to redefine their relationship as abusive and thus take steps to change. These catalysts are: a change in the level of violence, a change in resources (availability of finances, shelter, and so on), a change in the relationship where the honeymoon phase of the cycle diminished, despair (loss of hope that the relationship will get better), a change in the visibility of violence (public humiliation and abuse) and external definitions of the relationship (family, friends and community's support can help to contradict the abuser's view of the abused).

Kearney (2001) analyzed 13 qualitative research reports on domestic violence in order to understand women's experience of domestic violence and the ways in which they managed their experiences both within the relationship and through the process of leaving. Through her investigation, Kearney commented that intimate partner violence is seen as a normalized behavior that was "invisible and accepted by the women themselves, the couple, their family of origin, and their acquaintances and community in

order to preserve the values or commitment and social stability” (p. 275). She termed the process through which women were able to reconcile the internal and external conflicts within abusive relationships as “Enduring Love”, which she defined as “a continual struggle to redefine partner violence as temporary, survivable, or reasonable by adhering to values of commitment and self-sacrifice in the relationship and by using strategies to survive and control the psychic and physical harm of unpredictable abuse” (p. 275).

Kearney (2001) identified four phases of “Enduring Love” in an abusive relationship. The first phase is “This is what I want” which reflects the women entering into a romantic relationship which fulfilled their dreams of love and being loved, thus driven forward by “culturally defined expectations of a loyal, homemaking, love-sustaining role in their new family” (p. 275). The women generally cope with abuse in this stage by having hope in romantic relationship and the ideals of commitment. They see sacrifices and disappointments as a normal element of a loving relationship. The second phase is titled “The more I do, the worse I am”, where the abuse began to be a regular occurrence in the relationship. This is when the women begin to realize that accommodation and the sacrifices that they made are no longer effective in pacifying their partners. Kearney (2001) commented that in this phase, women are often trapped in the relationship because of children and economic dependence. In order to preserve their hope for the relationship, women resort to shrinking their sense of self, and other strategies such as (a) rationalization, whereby women tried to find logical explanations for their partners’ abusive behavior and their own inability to control it; and, (b) anticipatory maneuvering, wherein the women make great effort in trying to behave in ways that reduce the possibility of provoking their partners. The third phase is “I’ve had enough” which involves a turning point, where what was seen as within the bounds of a

loving relationship earlier is no longer seen as such. Yet, in this “enduring love” paradox, Kearney (2001) pointed out, “increasing realization of the intolerability of the situation was permeated by emotional pain, as women considered losing security and family status” (p. 277). Kearney further states that this turning point can be subtle or sudden and lists a number of factors that led to the change in perception. The factors given by Kearney are deliberate intervention from the outside; inadvertent exposure of the abuse, leading to framing of the situation in a new light; an act by the partner so egregious that its wrongness became undeniable; an internal accumulation of hurt and disillusionment that finally outweighed the hope of improvement; or an increase in self-worth because of outside experiences that made independence seem possible (p. 277).

The final phase is that of “I was finding me”, which is the time period after the women have left their abusive partners and venture into a new life on their own. This period involves a new set of challenges, including relinquishing of the bond with the abuser and the hope of having an intact family, and the formation of a new fragile kind of love that holds onto what is healthy for the women and their children.

In a qualitative study, Moe (2007) interviewed 19 shelter residents. She applauded the survivors of abuse for being active help seekers, notwithstanding the fact that they often felt entrapped in their relationship as a result of the failures of various agencies in granting them the necessary help. Moreover, cultural and ethnic norms also seem to play a part in how women view and approach sources of help (Moe, 2007). It is not uncommon for abused women to seek help or support from friends and relatives. No matter where or who the abused women approach for help, Moe believed it is essential that unconditional assistance be granted. Besides, women who received unconditional and empathetic support in response to their cry for help will be empowered to continue their fight to be set free from the abusive relationship. She concluded that every bit of



helpful response given to the abused women helps to spur them on to further effort in seeking help.

In conclusion, most qualitative studies seem to indicate that leaving an abusive relationship is a process that takes place over time and often occurs in stages or phases. The abused women often exhibit both vulnerability and strength in coping with the abuse they have faced. Continual support is needed to help women to sustain their decision to stay out of the abusive relationship. Rhatigan et al. (2005) in their reflection on partner violence research over the past 20 years urged researchers to develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates the multiple academic disciplines in order to give a holistic understanding of intimate partner violence and to improve on current violence reduction programs.

### **Summary**

It is evident that the literature on domestic violence is not only controversial; it is extremely contradictory as well. No matter what theoretical position you wish to defend, you will be able to find evidence to support your arguments. Until the dust settles, I will choose a theoretical perspective that I think has the strongest support. I am in favor of the feminist perspective as I believe that domestic violence is clearly gendered. So in this study, I am employing a feminist perspective.

The literature also indicates that terminating a relationship with a violent male partner is a process, and many factors affect such a decision. For each woman those decisions are dependent on the particular circumstances she faces. Each woman must be viewed as an individual who may have developed her own survival skills, which have enabled her to survive in the abusive relationship. It is wise for helping professionals to

facilitate in enabling women to make informed choices, and not to pressure them into making a reactive and potentially dangerous response which they may regret later.

There are no studies published in Malaysia with an explicit focus on the process of women leaving abusive relationships. By understanding their experiences of abuse and their experiences in leaving the abusive relationship, counselors can help to improve the support given to abused women in their attempt to end or escape the violence. Those who have most to teach us about this are the women who have already succeeded.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I describe the research methodology used in this study. A description of the phenomenological method involved in data collection from women who have left an abusive relationship, data analysis, issues of trustworthiness of the study and ethical considerations are all dealt with in this chapter.

#### **The Phenomenological Research Methodology**

The research method chosen is related to the questions to be answered. Morrow (2007) suggested that qualitative research is appropriate when one seeks to present a detailed and in-depth view of a phenomenon. As the research questions seek to understand in depth the phenomenon of leaving, a qualitative, phenomenological approach would be appropriate for the study. Kirkwood (1993) asserted that research needs to “bring forward the position and experiences of women that are often ignored or misinterpreted in culture where information is controlled by men” (p. 34). In this study, the voice of the women survivors who have left an abusive relationship is clearly heard.

As Creswell, Hanson, Clark, and Morales (2007) put it succinctly, the task of the phenomenologist is to “describe what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (p. 252). The philosophical assumptions of phenomenology rest on studying people’s experiences as they are lived every day; viewing these experiences as conscious; and, arriving at a description of the essence of these experiences. This involves gathering a series of stories that will provide a rich narrative of each woman’s experience. In this study, I listened intensely to the leaving experiences of seven women. Their stories were summarized to begin the development

of a comprehensive frame intended to facilitate an understanding of the process/es women use to leave abusive relationships.

The researcher “collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals--what they experienced and how they experienced it” (Creswell et al., 2007, pp. 252-253). Thus, the goal of phenomenology is to understand (Dukes, 1984); “to describe the essential experience or meaning” (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). The procedures, illustrated by Moustakas (1994) cited by Creswell et al. (2007), involve identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing one’s experiences, and collecting data from the few people who have experienced the phenomenon. Data analysis is done by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes, and combining the statements into themes to express the essence of the experience.

The focus of this study is on the phenomenon of leaving intimate partner violence as experienced by survivors of intimate partner violence. The researcher’s assumption is that abused women are the experts of their own lives; their voices will at least give a clearer picture of the realities, the challenges and obstacles the women went through in the process of leaving.

Edmund Husserl is the originator of the philosophical movement of phenomenology. He emphasized that consciousness and experience are phenomena in their own right and that it is critical for them to be understood on their own terms. Husserl believed that those wanting to learn about a phenomenon must go to “the things themselves” to discover the individual’s experience of the phenomenon and to describe it in her own words (Hammond, Howarth, & Keat, 1991).

According to Husserl (1970), all knowledge is ultimately grounded in human experience; therefore this focus on experience provides access to all that can be known directly. Most of the scholars believe the best way to understand a phenomenon of human experience is to go back to the people who have lived or are living that phenomenon. Since this present study intends to understand the leaving experience of the abused woman, the best way to understand the experience is thus to obtain the knowledge from the woman survivor who has actually left the abusive relationship. I studied the individual in her world, in a holistic manner, in order to get a description of the experience of leaving the abusive relationship. The researcher's goal is not to look at a subject under a microscope but to look out through her eyes.

### **Researcher as Instrument**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument in both collecting and analyzing data. Because of this fact, bracketing is of utmost importance. Bracketing is setting aside personal bias by recognizing any previous beliefs regarding the phenomenon that may interfere with the focus of the study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2001). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) proposed that information pertaining to training, fieldwork, data collection procedures and data analysis be reported. Below is the statement of the researcher.

I believe that knowledge of the researcher's background, values and biases allows the reader to assess the impact of these on the research process. I will, therefore, briefly describe my particular background and values that I believe have shaped my work on this study.

I am a middle class woman working in a helping profession, a registered counselor and I have been working in social care since 1998. Throughout my years working with the social care ministry, working with Malaysian Care and also The Way Youth Development Centre, I have encountered many cases of women involved in domestic violence; most of the women were still remaining in the abusive relationship. Like many of the people, when I first heard of the abuse, my first response is “why don’t the abused women leave?” without knowing the complexity involved in leaving an abusive relationship. As I began to read and attend workshops related to domestic violence, it dawned on me that it is not that the women do not want to leave; sometimes they are trapped in the abusive relationship due to the shame and secrecy related to the abuse. And they also face the cycle of violence that keeps them hopeful that the abusive partner will change. Through all this I began to be more empathetic towards their plight. Only then I began to realize that leaving the abusive relationship involves not only tremendous physical risk for the woman who is being abused, but also the potential loss of her entire world, in terms of her current way of life. I learned to be patient and support the woman whatever stage she is at. Only the woman herself can come to a point where she realizes that her current world as she knows it is not working for her and that she must prepare to face the uncertainty of a new way of living. For the time being, I have chosen to respect their decision to remain in the abusive relationship. And for those who choose to leave, I respect and support their decision in whatever way I can.

Despite the knowledge, whenever I hear of stories of the abuse, I always feel a sense of injustice. I feel angry and yet feel powerless to do anything about it. I abhor violence and think it is wrong to abuse. I always wish I could do something to assist the

women in abusive relationships. I wish I could find the means to help them end the abuse but cannot. It is for these reasons that I engaged in this particular research.

Another event also contributed to my interest in doing this research. It came as a result of meeting up about six years back with a long lost friend from university days. She is a legal professional and always had an interest in women's issues. She herself is a survivor of IPV and we shared a great deal on this issue. From then on, when I needed legal advice in dealing with domestic violence, I often sought her counsel. She encouraged me to do a study on the issue of domestic violence and seeing her contented life after leaving the abusive relationship, she led me to see that leaving can be a viable option for women in an abusive relationship though it is by no means the only way. At the same time my own interest in learning more about women's experiences of leaving abusive relationships grew stronger. Moreover, during this time, my husband was also encouraging me to pursue my dream of further study. Hence this topic became my choice of research.

In order to understand the domestic violence issue better, beginning in 2009 I participated in several discussion sessions with the social work managers at the Women's Aid Organization (WAO) as well as at the All Women's Action Society (AWAM). I have attended workshops organized by AWAM to help women in domestic violence situations and also continue to familiarize myself with research in area of domestic violence. During these two years of learning, I saw the struggles that the abused women faced and realized that leaving is not an easy option. I am more appreciative of the courage and strength that these women have in fighting against violence in their lives be it through leaving or finding ways to cope with it while remaining in the abusive relationship.

### **Biases in the Researcher**

I am a married woman with two daughters. I have not been abused and I have not experienced that type of relationship. As a Christian, I believe in the sanctity of marriage and abide by the teaching in the Bible that marriage is for a life time. However, I do support the view that divorce can take place when a person's worth is being constantly degraded either by words or by action.

I believe that women who have experienced abuse, left the relationship, and have stayed out of an abusive relationship are able to identify their experience of staying out of the abusive relationship. Not only can they identify this experience, they can articulate it as well. I am also of the opinion that these women want to share their experience(s) with the hope of helping other women in similar situations. The participants in this study appreciated being able to share their experiences of leaving and of staying out in order to shed light for others. I subscribe to the idea that violence against women is a major health and social problem. Therefore, I came to this study with the assumption that the counselor has something to offer and can somehow help through research and knowledge building, education and practice.

The four biases that may interfere with the research as identified by the researcher are (a) domestic violence is a traumatic experience that impacted the self-esteem of the women survivors negatively, (b) abused women need a long time to come to the decision of leaving the abusive relationship, (c) in order to understand the experience of leaving the abusive relationship, it is imperative that we hear from the perspective of women survivors' who have gone through the leaving, and (d) abused women have their own internal resources that can guide them in making the best decision for themselves.



## **Data Collection**

### **Sample**

Maxwell (2005) mentioned that one of the most important considerations in selecting participants in a qualitative study is that the setting and the individual must be able to provide the information needed to answer the research questions. Thus, I have made a purposeful selection of my participants in order to obtain information-rich cases.

I have set a few criteria in the purposeful selection of the participants. The first criterion is that the women must have left an abusive relationship and been apart from this relationship for at least one year. As stated in the definition earlier, women who have left an abusive relationship are defined as those who are either divorced or in the process of divorcing the abusive spouse. The time frame of at least a year was mainly an ethical one as I did not want to involve women who were in acute crisis and who might choose to participate with the hope of receiving help, be it physical or psychological, which is beyond the purpose of this study. Moreover, women who had left relationships would be able to describe their life experiences before and after the abuse, as well as how they are experiencing their lives now. Both Kirkwood (1993) and Nicarity (1987) who have conducted studies on women who have left abusive relationships found that a one year or more timeframe is appropriate.

The second criterion is that the women must indicate that they are willing to discuss these life experiences in a number of in-depth, face-to-face interviews whereby the interview is recorded. The third criterion was that the women must be at least eighteen years old as this is the legal age where they can make decisions for themselves in terms of marriage.

I tried to be as explicit as possible about the purpose and processes of my research. I created an information sheet about my study and all participants were given a copy; the information sheet gave comprehensive information to enable recruitment of potential participants for this study (see Appendix A).

One of the main obstacles in studying abuse in intimate relationships is the problem of access. Because abuse usually takes place behind closed doors and there is a strong stigma attached to it, women are deterred from publicly identifying themselves as having been abused. There is no identifiable population of women from which one can sample.

Most of the research on abused women leaving abusive relationships has drawn their sample from women's shelters (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Pagelow, 1981; Wuest, 1999). Although women in shelters are the most easily accessible population, I drew my participants from the middle-class and /or professional women rather than from women in shelter homes. I hope through selection of participants from this segment of the population, many can come to realize that abuse does not only happen in the lower class, it can happen to anyone. Here, I am assuming that women with access to financial resources probably would not seek aid from a women's shelter and would probably make alternate housing arrangements. And I did manage to recruit my participants from women who identified themselves as having experienced abuse in their marriage. To achieve this, I did an email blast (see Appendix B); I circulated the information sheet to all the contacts in my email address book, on my facebook page and also on the university students' list.

The email was also sent to several agencies such as the Women's Aid Organization and AWAM, as these are the women's organizations that work with victims and survivors of intimate partner violence. Seemingly characteristic of the email process, the information sheet was frequently forwarded to others on a recipient's contact lists.

This method of purposive sampling yielded a sample of 6 participants from various regions in Malaysia. One participant from the northern region was recruited via her own "publicity" in the newspaper regarding the legal case she had filed against her abusive husband who had physically abused her. She had indicated in the newspaper article that she was willing to assist any women who experience abuse. I first contacted her via phone and shared with her about my study. She expressed interest in the study and requested that I email her the information sheets. A follow-up call was made a few days later and she agreed to participate in this study.

The purposive method of sampling was used to gather participants who are not only diverse in backgrounds, but because of the self-selection process involved, would be interested in discussing their experiences, were less likely to censor their story of abuse, and thereby provide a richer, more in-depth account and understanding of events they had experienced. Potential participants were contacted via telephone and were provided an overview of the study. Women who expressed an interest in participating in the study after hearing the overview were contacted and appointments were made for an interview.

According to Morrow (2005), it is the sufficiency of data, not numbers that should determine the selection of participants. Morrow(2007) echoed Polkinghorne by saying "the concern is not how much data was gathered or from how many sources but whether the data collected is sufficiently rich to bring refinement and clarity to

understand an experience” (p. 140). Polkinghorne (1989) recommends five to twenty-five individuals. There were seven participants in this study providing a rich data source. It is typical of qualitative research to study a few individuals in depth.

### **Participants’ Rights**

Since the women are expected to share private aspects of their lives with a stranger and make the personal public, they may feel vulnerable. They are thus given the right to choose whether to participate or not, to withdraw from the research at any time they wish and to review the interview materials, and to ask that certain portions of the materials not be used.

If the participants want to, they can request a copy of the taped interviews. However, they are given a copy of the interview transcript to review and to ensure that the information given has been rightly portrayed. I went through the informed consent form with them and the information sheet regarding this study to ensure that they understood what it involved to participate in this study. They all signed the informed consent form to indicate their willingness to participate in this study.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

As the topic of violence in marriage is both intimate and private in nature, the data was gathered mainly through in-depth interviews. In-depth interview was used to elicit information so that a holistic understanding of the participant’s leaving experiences could be obtained. Each potential participant was first contacted via phone. Brief information regarding the study was conveyed to the potential participants by phone. When the potential candidate indicated interest, more details regarding the study were emailed to them followed up with another phone call. Once the women gave their

verbal consent to participate, I called to make an appointment for interview. The day before the interview date, I either sent an email or SMS to the participant to confirm that the planned interview day, time and venue was still convenient for her. The process of in-depth interview is now described.

### **The In-depth Interview**

The procedures that led to the in-depth interviews were adapted from the steps recommended by Creswell (2007). These steps include identifying participants based on purposeful sampling, choosing the type of interview suitable for the study, preparing an interview protocol, identifying a conducive place for the interview and obtaining consent to be interviewed.

As mentioned in the sampling section, a purposeful sampling method was used to recruit participants for this study. An in-depth interview process on a one-on-one basis has been chosen as the most appropriate method of data collection as it is less threatening and allows the women to freely describe their experiences in a private and confidential environment. Furthermore, this one-on-one interview process enabled me to be focus on one particular woman at a time and this allowed me to obtain thick descriptions from the survivors.

An interview protocol was used in interview process. The interview protocol had three parts to it: the beginning stage aimed at rapport building, followed by open-ended questioning regarding their leaving experience, and finally a wrapping up stage to capture whatever information that the participant deem relevant for the researcher to know.

As for a conducive place for the interview, I allowed the participants to choose a venue of their choice as long as it was a private and safe place. Four of the participants chose their homes as the preferred venue for the interview, one chose a church premise, another participant chose to be interviewed at her office after office hours and one participant chose to be interviewed at the AWAM counseling room. The rationale for allowing the participants to choose the interview venue was to ensure the research participants felt safe and relaxed so that they could freely share their experiences. The convenience of the participants was also taken into consideration in allowing them to choose a venue of their preference.

Lastly, a written informed consent form was given to the participant to sign once a woman met the sampling criteria and agreed to participate in this study. They were also given a copy of a letter from the University Malaya (Appendix C), stating my status as a postgraduate student in the university and requesting their help in my data collection. This was to give confidence to the participants that the researcher was genuine and under the supervision of the university faculty. In the first interview session with the participants, I explained to them the purpose and procedure of the study. I also cautioned the women of the potential for re-emergence of painful emotions related to recalling and sharing their stories. They were also told of the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study, the right to ask questions about the study and also of the researcher. I went through all the items listed in the information sheet I had given to them. Issues pertaining to confidentiality were explained and they were invited to choose a flower name to represent themselves.

All the participants signed the consent forms before the proper interview began. They were aware that the data gathered was to be used by the researcher in completing her PhD degree and also for possible publication in future. The participants were offered the option of providing feedback on analysis of the data and written drafts in the later phase of the study, but only one participant indicated interest in doing so.

As the topic of the interview is of a sensitive nature, it is of utmost importance that a trusting relationship is established for the participants to feel comfortable in sharing their experiences. I spent between half an hour to an hour with each participant before and after the interview. Each recorded interview session lasted anywhere between 90-180 minutes or longer. In addition to the interview, participants were asked to complete a demographic data sheet that asked information about income (both before and after leaving), educational level, employment, length of relationship with their abuser, duration that they left the abuser, status of the relationship and number of children and their ages. For each participant the collected data included their basic demographics, interview notes, the transcribed interview, and summary information, which was kept in an individual file for each participant.

In order to gain as much information as possible in the participant's own words, the questions asked were general and open-ended (Patton, 1990). As a prelude to the more sensitive questions that relate to the violence, each participant was initially asked general questions about her relationship with the abuser. The first question was designed to elicit the participant's story about her experiences before leaving the abusive relationship. It also allowed her an opportunity to express her ideas about the relationship in general and provided a broader context from which to understand her response to the abuse. This question also allowed participants to discuss events leading to the abuse, such as meeting her abuser and their relationship prior to the abuse. The

second question was designed to elicit the participant's experiences of leaving the abusive relationship as well as events leading to leaving her abuser. The third question was designed to elicit responses concerning the state of the woman's life experiences as they are at present. The final question was provided to give participants the opportunity to add any information that had not been covered in the interview. Figure 3.1 gives an example of the interview questions.

General Questions	Prompts
1. Tell me about your experience before leaving your abusive relationship.	How did you meet? Could you tell me a bit more...?
2. Tell me about your experience of leaving your abusive relationship.	How did you realize? What goes through your mind when you think of leaving?
3. Tell me how is it for you now	What is your life like now?
4. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about?	

*Figure 3.1.* The Interview Questions.

An interview protocol based on the above questions was prepared for all interviews planned. It also consists of space for the researcher to note down observation notes, issues and reflections. The questions are designed to ask participants to share their personal stories and the process they underwent in leaving the abusive relationship. The questions were also aimed at getting participants to reconstruct their experience and to explore its meaning in answering the research questions as set out in Chapter 1. It was important that I maintained my phenomenological inquiry by searching for the



essence of the experience of what it is like to be a woman who has left an abusive relationship. Am I capturing it? The identified biases of the researcher were put beside the interview protocol as a reminder for the researcher not to allow her own biases to interfere with the data collection.

The interviews were all conducted by the researcher. During each interview, I carried with me a list of support agencies in case issues rose during the interview that caused distress to the participant so that I could provide them with the contact details of support agencies. Each of the interviews was audio taped and transcribed verbatim with the permission of the participants. A Panasonic IC Recorder was used for the interview. Before the interview, the functionality of the recorder was checked to ensure it was in working order to avoid bad or unclear recording. New batteries were used to ensure that it was able to last the duration of the interview to avoid any interruption.

Immediately after each interview, I went to a private place where I could check that the recording was all right and note down whatever thoughts I had relating to the interview in my research field notes. It included the conversations that had taken place before and after the recorder was activated, and observations of the participants' body language. After each interview, a thank you note was sent to the participants, in appreciation of the time and expertise they contributed to the study. Once the interview was transcribed, they were given a copy of the transcript to confirm that it truly reflected their voices. Follow-up interviews were also carried out to clarify gaps in the explanation and to refine the emerging themes. Some were through further email and phone contact to clarify some details such as race and age of the spouse.

As suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), the interview process should evolve as the interview progressed; therefore, feedback from individual participants was taken into consideration for future interviews. One question that was asked during interview with the first participant regarding how she should define an abusive relationship was excluded as the participant gave her answers based on reading that she had done after leaving the abusive relationship. She said only after reading the literature related to domestic violence did she realize that violence included emotional and psychological abuse. Only then I realized that it would be better for the participant to describe their experiences rather than asking them to define an abusive relationship. Dr. Rohaida, who is an expert in qualitative research from the Faculty of Education at the University of Malaya also commented that the question was too academic in nature.

The interview was stopped once a saturation point was reached. Ambert et al. (1995) defined 'saturation point' as "after a certain number of interviews, major trends begin to recur, and outlying or secondary themes have already emerged. At that point, researchers can stop adding new individuals, couples, or families to their sample" (p. 886). In this study, saturation point was reached at 7 participants as responses became similar to those that had been previously gathered and the answers to the research questions had been adequately covered.

## **Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis typically involves selecting and reducing the data of interest into areas that allow for the detection of categories and patterns in the responses of the participants which are cyclical and evolutionary rather than linear (Miles & Huberman, 1994)). For this study, a qualitative technique of pattern coding was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) have stated that, when working with text, one can find recurrent themes which pull together many separate pieces of data. It is important to note that these patterns are not causal. They are a way to find similarities and differences within the context of an interview.

Examining the transcripts, looking for meaning units, and ultimately themes, involves comparing and contrasting the participants' descriptions of the experience. The researcher moves from parts to the whole which increases understanding (Polkinghorne, 1989). An assumption made in phenomenological analysis is that a person's experiences are organized in some way, that they are structured, and that a thematic analysis can elucidate this structure. Analysis of the transcripts was performed individually by the researcher. Analysis was conducted using the participants' own words. Miles and Huberman (1994) further state that people begin to draw together patterns when they read text. It was in the initial readings of the interview transcripts that the themes that would provide the structure for further analysis began to emerge.

Maxwell (2005) recommended that the "researcher begins data analysis immediately after finishing the first interview or observation, and continues to analyze the data as long as he or she is working on the research" (p. 95). Following Maxwell's recommendation, analysis of this study began as soon as data collection began, that is, after the first interview. Analysis and data collection proceed in a cyclical fashion where preliminary analysis informs subsequent data collection and so forth (Morrow, 2005).

Immediately after the first interview, I began to prepare my interview data for analysis. First, I transcribed verbatim all the interviews done. Each of the transcripts was type written in a Word document and each line of the transcript was assigned a number using the Microsoft Word software. Each interview transcript was read several times to gain an appreciation of the essence of the interview. After coding the interviews, matrices were developed per code by interview as a means of organizing and displaying the data. The matrices allowed me to discern patterns or themes in the data.

I struggled with the decision as to whether or not to use qualitative data analysis software. Given the learning curve, would it really save time and would the amount of time saved be worth the loss of intimacy with the data that comes from physically thumbing through notes over and over again? I decided that instead of utilizing qualitative data analysis software, I would do a manual analysis using existing features in Microsoft Word software. As I transcribed, I would also type my comments on the side by using the insert comment features in the Microsoft Word program so that I would capture all the impressions that came to me as I read the transcript. I read and reread the transcript after two days and again typed any comments on the margin. This process was repeated for all the interview data until no more comments could be found. Immersion in the data was achieved by becoming familiar with the participants' stories. All of the interview transcripts were read several times in order to grasp the participants' expression and meaning. Significant statements and sentences were highlighted within the comments section. Coding involved identifying significant statements and grouping them into meaningful units and patterns with supporting information. The data search was done manually. While the process was time consuming, I did feel familiar with the data in a way that might have been lost had the computer been doing the searching.

After preparing my interview data for analysis, the data was set aside for about a week before I began my first level of formal analysis. A matrix was created to begin analyzing my data. The matrix served as a means of organizing and displaying the data. Matrices were developed for each code covering every interview, thus enabling me to discern patterns or themes in the data. Line by line coding for this research initially revealed 15 categories. As the categories were arranged and rearranged the number reduced. An example of the initial codes arrived at for the first participant is given in the Appendix H.

As suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), I would need to read and reread my data more than two times, then I looked for repeated words or phrases and grouped them together, I then coded passages according to categories. I placed all the supporting data into the relevant coded categories. In this process, I tried to stay close to the data I had coded and then recoded. I then organized the emergent themes in developing an understanding of the women's experience in abusive relationships and reasons for leaving as well as the resources that enabled them to leave. This process was repeated for all the participants in the present study. I continued to ask myself throughout the analysis: "what is necessary for leaving?" and "how do they leave?" Similarities and dissimilarities were carefully looked at. Dissimilarities, for the present study were not unusual and did not present a challenge for me during the analysis.

Similarities in the forms of abuse were apparent early in the analysis. The types of abuse were different in specificity, but in generality they were very similar. How the forms of abuse related to leaving was difficult to see at first. All of the participants had very vivid description of what it was like living in an abusive relationship. They could describe the abuser's behavior in detail as well as their response to the behavior.

When the initial matrix for the first round of the data analysis was done, it was presented to my supervisor and also to a group of fellow postgraduate students. Their feedback was incorporated into it and then the relevant factors were grouped together, and collapsed into the final matrix.

Final analysis yielded five main categories. Emerging from each of these primary categories were additional factors and patterns. The participants were asked to confirm, clarify and expand findings. Only one of the participants, Lily, made a dedicated effort to join the researcher in data analysis. She was given the theme and the matrices. Her feedback was incorporated into the final matrix. Her comment was that the factor in control should be clearly stated as social control when it is relating to the abuser limiting the woman's social life. The other participants' involvement was limited to just confirming the accuracy of the transcript and indicating if they were agreeable with the themes that emerged from the data as observed by the researcher.

### **Ensuring Rigor in the Study**

In a qualitative study, the question of rigor or trustworthiness arises. The trustworthiness of the study rests on establishing the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the data (Maxwell, 2005). "Credibility in qualitative research is said to correspond to internal validity in quantitative approaches, transferability to external validity or generalizability, dependability to reliability, and confirmability to objectivity" (Morrow, 2007, pp. 251-252). It is the researcher's responsibility to establish the trustworthiness of the study. The following section will describe the steps taken in this study to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

## **Credibility**

The criterion of credibility is similar to that of the internal validity of a study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) deemed ensuring credibility as one of the important factors in establishing trustworthiness in a qualitative study. Several strategies as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used to ensure creditability of the study. Firstly, to ensure that credible findings will be produced, they suggest prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation. In the present study, I immersed in prolonged engagement and also observation during the interview sessions as it is not possible to do in-site observation of the occurrence of the abuse. The observation is to note down whatever information that is not being captured by the recorder, namely the non-verbal language of the participants and also observations of their home environment if the interview is conducted in the participant's house.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested five strategies to promote confidence that researchers have accurately recorded the phenomena under scrutiny, they are (1) "activities increasing the probability that credible finding will be produced", (2) "peer debriefing", (3) analysis of negative cases, (4) "referential adequacy" and (5) a member check. In this study, I tried to stay as close as possible to the strategies suggested.

**Prolonged engagement.** This is one of the activities that increase the probability that credible findings will be produced. With respect to prolonged engagement, I spent eight months (May – December 2010) in the research field to obtain research data from the women survivors.

**Triangulation.** Another activity that increases the probability of credible finding is triangulation. Triangulation involves using different methods, different investigators and different sources of data (Merriam, 2001). In the present study only triangulation of different sources of data has been used, namely interview and observation field notes

during the interview. Shenton (2004) posited that the use of a wide range of informants is one way of triangulating via the data source. He argued that individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the phenomena can be obtained based on the contribution of a range of people. In this study, participants recruited are from various races (Chinese, Indian, Malay and also Punjabi), religions (Christian, Muslim, Sikh), educational and social economic backgrounds. This wide range of participant backgrounds provides the study with a rich picture of the leaving experience of women survivors across the board.

**Peer debriefing.** Conducting research can be a long and lonely process. Besides my supervisor, I discussed my work on a regular basis with a group of fellow research students. Such peer debriefing actually provided me with an opportunity to discuss my work in a supportive environment and also to improve my work. Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended peer debriefing as a strategy to ensure credibility. The purpose of peer debriefing is to expose the researcher's "blind spots", discuss working hypotheses, the findings of the study and also act as a channel of 'catharsis' for the researcher to vent out any emotion that may affect the outcome of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). In this respect, I was fortunate to have a friend who was also doing PhD studies and was a volunteer with a women's group. She was able to listen to my emotional ups and downs and help me to remain focused during my journey. We met and talked on a monthly basis; when there was need we met either in person or shared through email correspondence. I also met with fellow PhD students to discuss some of my struggles and also my findings at sessions organized for all those students working under my former supervisor, the late Professor Dr. Suradi. These debriefing sessions provided a sounding board for me to test my developing ideas and interpretations, and probing by others helped me to keep my own biases at bay. The



questions and observations also enabled me to refine the presentation of the findings in the light of the comments made.

**Negative Case Report** .In qualitative study, the researcher is encouraged to report negative cases where the researcher may encounter cases that do not fit it into the pattern and trends reflected by the outcome of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2000). In my study, negative case analysis involved a re-examination of every case, after the initial analysis was completed, to see whether or not the characteristics or properties of the emergent themes were applicable to all cases. When it was determined that there were no negative cases or disconfirming evidence, the analysis was considered complete.

**Referential adequacy.** The fourth strategy suggested is “referential adequacy” whereby the researcher is admonished to use appropriate terms in the interpretation and assessment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is to ensure that the terms used by the researcher to address the women’s leaving experience from intimate partner violence are purely based on the women survivors’ perspective. Hence, “bracketing” on the researcher’s part is of utmost importance and the researcher has tried to apply this throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data to ensure researcher biases will not influence the outcome of the study.

**The member check.** Lastly, member checking, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study’s credibility. Member checking refers to going back to the participants of the study to validate the accuracy and interpretation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2001). In this study, participants were all given a copy of the interview transcript to verify that I had correctly recorded and transcribed the interview. Another element of member checking involves verification of the researcher’s emerging themes. However,

when asked if they would like to be involved in examining the emerging themes, only one of the participants, Lily, expressed an interest. She was thus given a copy of the emerging themes and asked if she agreed with the emerging themes and was invited to give feedback if she found any discrepancies. Generally, she agreed with the themes and suggested that the researcher be more specific on the factor relating to the theme of experience of abuse. She felt that the control factor should be further specified as to whether the control was social control or financial control. Her suggestion was incorporated into the final analysis.

According to Sandelowski (1986) “a qualitative study is credible when it presents such faithful descriptions or interpretations of a human experience that people having that experience would immediately recognize it from those descriptions or interpretation as their own. A study is also credible when other people (other researchers or readers) can recognize the experience when confronted with it after only reading about it in a study” (p. 32). Ms Alina, who edited this write-up, has commented that she could see the images of her relatives who were abused in this study.

### **Transferability**

Morrow (2005) suggested transferability can be achieved “when the researcher provides sufficient information about the self (the researcher as instrument) and the research context, processes, participants, and researcher-participant relationships to enable the reader to decide how the findings may transfer” (p. 252). Information about the researcher has been stated in an earlier section and the biases of the researcher identified.

Ellsberg and Heise (2005) believed that in qualitative research, “researchers and participants are intimately related, and their interaction inevitably shapes the research process. Therefore, there is no pretense that the same results could be achieved with different researchers and participants” (p. 215). However, a thick description would enable others to decide if the findings are transferable. Thick description refers to “detailed, rich descriptions not only of participants’ experiences of phenomena but also of the contexts in which those experiences occur” (Morrow, 2005, p. 252). In this study, the in-depth interview allowed the participants’ experiences of leaving abusive relationships to be heard, the events and feeling each participant had were all clearly recorded along with the field notes taken during the interview. Detailed background information for all the seven participants are provided in Chapter Four of this study. The thick, rich descriptions provided by the researcher and the extensive use of participants’ quotations allow readers to make informed decisions about the credibility and transferability of the findings in this study.

With regard to researcher-participant’s relationship, I attempted to equalize power between myself and the participants. I made an effort to create an atmosphere in which the women could feel they were equal participants in the research endeavor. I believed them to be the experts on their experiences; I tried to convey my respect for the women’s experience by listening fully to their stories during the interview. I adopted an attitude of learner and recorder of women’s experiences. I gave them the right to choose the venue and time of the interview and also assured them of their power to stop the interview at any time or to refuse to have any part of the information included in the study. I also attempted to consult with the participants during the analysis phase to ensure that the findings accurately reflected their experience. One of the participants

reviewed the drafts of the report and provided feedback which was incorporated into the final report.

### **Dependability**

The criterion of dependability in trustworthiness is aimed at addressing the issue of reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Accordingly, the dependability or the degree to which the researcher can describe and account for the data collection, interpretation and how the changes in the research process were addressed will be assessed. In this study, the research process was documented by means of an audit trail, including field notes, raw data and reflexive journal keeping. The researcher has listed an account of the fieldwork phase of the study in Table 3.1.

## **Ethical Considerations**

### **Informed consent**

As I conducted this study, I took measures to protect participants from harm including creating an informed consent form (Appendix D). Participants were given a copy for their own safe-keeping and reference. They were also informed that participation in this study is on a voluntary basis. They had the right and power to refuse to answer any questions and were able to opt out at any time during the interview. When a potential participant showed interest in participating in the study, I contacted her via phone to explain in detail the purpose of the study. I asked her where she would like to meet to sign the consent form and to have the first interview.

*Table 3.1 The Audit Trail*

	Step in Audit Trail	Evidence
1. Preparation for data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposal accepted by the university committee</li> <li>• Obtain letter from university to authenticate researcher's status as postgraduate student of the university.</li> <li>• Prepare information for potential participants</li> <li>• Prepare interview protocol</li> <li>• Send email to NGOs, email blast to advertise the research</li> <li>• Call potential participants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Letter from UM</li> <li>• Contacts with potential participants</li> <li>• List of participants</li> </ul>
2. Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirm the date, time and venue for the interview</li> <li>• Ensure that the audio recorder is functional and spare batteries are available</li> <li>• Explain the purpose of the interview to the participant</li> <li>• Go through the information sheet and also the informed consent form with the participant</li> <li>• Tape the interview</li> <li>• Be alert in observing the mannerisms of participant, the non-verbal language and also the environment for the interview if it is at the participant's residence or office</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signed inform consent form</li> <li>• Total of 14 audio sessions were recorded</li> </ul>
3. Data analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen through the recorded interview</li> <li>• Transcribe the interview verbatim</li> <li>• Make initial comments in the margin of the transcript</li> <li>• Reread the transcript after a few days. Write down further comments</li> <li>• Form initial coding</li> <li>• Discern themes</li> <li>• Present the first analysis to a supervisor, participants and peers for review and comment</li> <li>• Refine and incorporate feedback into the analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early matrix</li> <li>• Middle matrix</li> <li>• Final matrix</li> </ul>

The potential participants were asked to choose a private and quiet venue that was convenient for them. The interview locations included the homes of participants, a counseling room, and the workplace of a participant. Whatever setting was chosen by the participant, the primary consideration was safety and privacy. I then made an appointment to meet with the potential participant to obtain informed consent and to conduct the in-depth interview in the place they had chosen.

### **Confidentiality**

Participants were informed of the consent process and of their right to confidentiality. They were informed that all documents produced from the interview would be confidential. A fictitious name of a different flower was given to each participant. Transcripts were stored in a locked cabinet at my home office and only my supervisor, apart from me, would have access to the transcripts. The audio record and transcripts would be destroyed once the study was completed, that is when this study has been accepted by the university as meeting the requirement for completion.

### **Protection from Harm**

As I was aware that painful memories and feelings may arise during the interviews, I contacted a couple of women's organizations and counseling centers and informed them about my study and confirmed that I could refer my participants to them if necessary. I also gave to each participant a copy of a contact sheet with phone numbers of women's organizations and counseling centres should the women need to seek help, support or counseling (Appendix E).

In line with “doing no harm” to the participants, Davis and Taylor (2006) have posited that “providing women with a safe and supportive context for telling their stories of violence can be a powerful transformative process that leads to a journey of empowerment” (pp. 199-200). I allowed plenty of time for the participants to share their abuse stories and also their journey in leaving the abuser. Usually, the interview would begin with a very relaxed environment, maybe over a cup of tea. I tried to be sensitive as I broached such an intimate topic with the participants. In the midst of the interview, if the participants showed signs of distress as a result of recounting an extremely painful experience of abuse, they were given a choice to either discontinue the interview or to proceed after some time or to wait for another time. All of the participants were able to collect themselves after some time, so I was able to finish the interviews on the same day.

### **Conflict of the Researcher/Counselor Role**

Morrow (2005) asserted that “the challenge for most qualitative researchers who are also counselors or psychologists is to manage the slippery slope on which boundaries between research and therapy may be confused” (p. 253). This was a challenging task for me, as a counselor, in conducting interviews of this nature. I faced the danger of confusing my role as a researcher with my professional role as a counselor. I had to constantly remind myself that my role then was as a researcher and not to overstep my boundaries. My role as a researcher meant that I was there to learn from the participants and understand their experiences from their perspectives and not to counsel them. I had to stay focused on the purpose of the interviews. However, I was prepared to give information and support if the need arose. All participants were given

a copy of the information sheet which contained contact numbers of women's organizations and counseling centers should they need to seek help.

In line with the feminist principles of research, this research was conducted with the women rather than on women. As Davis and Taylor (2006) commented, the story of leaving an abusive relationship and healing cannot be separated from the story of violence experienced by the women themselves. I gave plenty of time for the women to tell the whole story so that new insights might emerge; and so that this time might also serve as an opportunity for reflection and celebration of their new life after leaving the abusive relationship. Two women commented that by looking back at their lives, they were reminded how far they had come and it made them appreciate where they are today. Another participant said she never realized how strong she was till she retold her experience to me. Yet another said she only began to realize that sky is her limit as she sat down and retold her story to me.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have endeavored to provide a detailed description of my research procedures and methodology with the aim of giving readers a clear picture of the researcher's intention and the direction of this study. Thus, a detailed description of the research design, the researcher's biases, the data collection process and the data analysis process were all presented. Ethical issues, the potential risks and benefits and the trustworthiness of the study were also discussed.



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The present study explores the experience of women leaving abusive relationships with a special focus on the process of leaving. In particular, this study asks: what are the necessary elements that enable women to leave? In-depth interviews were conducted to elicit information about women's personal experiences. Leaving an abusive relationship is more complex than it appears on the surface. The survivors of this violence are fighters in their own right. In this chapter, detailed descriptions of each participant are presented along with details of their leaving experiences. The findings of this study are also presented.

#### **The Participants' Backgrounds**

The participants were seven Malaysian women who have successfully left abusive relationships. All the women were legally married to the abuser. All of them had children with their abuser. Participants were from various ethnic, educational and religious backgrounds. Summarized demographic information of the participants can be seen in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

*Summarized Demographics of the Participants*

	Rose	Carnation	Hibiscus	Orchid	Jasmine	Daisy	Lily
Age	42	31	48	40	29	33	38
Race	Chinese	Punjabi	Chinese	Malay	Malay	Indian	Chinese
Religion	Christian	Sikh	Catholic	Muslim	Muslim	Catholic	Christian
Education	LLB	Bachelor	SPM	MBA	SPM	PMR	Master
No of year left Status	4 yrs Divorced	1 yr Divorce Petition filed	3 yrs Divorce Petition filed	7 yrs Divorced	7 yrs Divorced	2yrs Divorce Petition filed	7yrs Divorced
Employment status while still in relationship	Working throughout	Not working	Not working	Working throughout	Working throughout	Not working	Not working after child birth
Employment Status at time of interview	Working	Working (part-time)	Working	Working	Working	Working	Working (part-time)

There were three Chinese, two Malay, one Indian and one Punjabi. Ages of participants ranged from 29 to 48 years old. The average length of time in the relationship was 8 years. The average length of time out of the relationship was 4 years. Three of the women had filed for divorce while the other four women had finalized their divorces. Out of the seven women interviewed, three (Rose, Orchid and Jasmine) were employed throughout their abusive relationship; Lily stopped working after her child was born; Carnation and Hibiscus worked on and off during marriage; while Daisy discontinued paid employment after she married.

One common stereotype of the abused woman is that her dependence is partially based on her educational level. This group varied according to educational level but the majority of participants were well educated. One had attained the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR i.e Lower Secondary Assessment certificate) level; two held the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM which is equivalent to the British O-level) qualification; two had a bachelor's degree; and, two had a master's degree.

Their partners' educational attainment mostly mirrored their own but there were some differences. For example, Daisy had only a Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) qualification while her husband was a graduate. Orchid's education was similar to that of her husband at the time of marriage, but she pursued higher education during her abusive relationship as she saw no future in the relationship. She termed her life "four in one" (in her own words) as during

that time she had to work, take care of her son, study for her bachelor's degree and also fight with her husband daily!

With regard to race, all of the women had married partners who were the same race as themselves except for Orchid - a Malay woman who married a Chinese husband.

Wife abuse is not limited to the poor. Six out of the seven women were from upper middle class backgrounds (household income of fifty thousand ringgit and above per annum) before the separation. The socioeconomic measurements were taken at two intervals in these women's lives, before and after separation. All except one can be said to be from the upper middle class before separation with household earnings of fifty thousand ringgit and above per annum, which is expected, because there were typically two sources of income. After the separation, the economic level of most participants fell to place them in the lower-middle income group (40 thousand ringgit and below), except for two working professionals who were able to maintain their income levels.

All the participants have children; five of the women have one child with the ex-husband and the other two have two children each. The average number of years married to the abuser was eight years, the longest being 15 years while the shortest was 3 years 6 months. Their partners' occupational background ranged from technical to managerial and professional positions.

The participants were of different races: two Malays, three Chinese, one Indian and one Punjabi. The different races represented in this sample are typical of the multi-racial community in Malaysia. It goes to show that violence knows no color! Nor is educational attainment necessarily an indicator of abuse. .

In general, the women tended to have an educational level comparable to that of their abusers, with two exceptions. One woman had a bachelor's degree while her "ex" had only the SPM. Another woman completed her bachelor's degree during her abusive relationship while her abuser did not progress in his academic achievement.

Many people do not understand why a woman stays on in an abusive relationship. They project themselves into the abused woman's position and visualize themselves walking away at the first sign of trouble. But leaving is never as easy as it appears at first glance. Each woman whose story appears in this study had her own reasons for staying on. Yet despite the humiliation, fear and pain that she endured, each ultimately left her abuser. These are stories, not of weakness, but of the resourcefulness and strength of the seven women in this study.

## **Participants' Stories**

### **Lily**

Lily is the first woman that I interviewed for the study. She was 38 years old at the time of the interview. Lily is a professional with a Master's degree. She worked as a solicitor before her son was born and had a promising career. However, she was made by her ex-husband to resign from her job to take care of her baby. Her husband is also a professional, and their household income was one hundred thousand and above per annum. Both are of Chinese origin and are regular church goers. They were married in 1998 and Lily left him in 2005. They had a son together. All throughout the interview, Lily told her story calmly.

At the time of the interview, her divorce had been finalized. She managed to maintain custody of her son and is now pursuing her PhD. My mental picture of her is that of a quiet and petite lady with a big heart. She also seems scholarly to me as she often talks about things that she reads.

Lily and her husband met at university while studying overseas. Their marriage lasted seven years and ended due to abuse by her ex-husband. Lily recounted that it was difficult for her to attempt to break free from the abuse. She recalled the condemnation and the objections of church leaders, the feeling of helplessness, and the sense of hopelessness as she has no means of escape even when she wanted to. But she was thankful for the support and encouragement that she received from her friends when she was contemplating leaving. They not only supported her morally, but also financially. Most of all she is thankful to have God to lean on and see her through.

The abuses in Lily's life began so very subtly that she did not even realize at first that it was happening. It was more emotional and psychological in nature.

It began with her husband having a bad temper and being controlling. Lily said:

“I think it was very subtle. I don't think I can say exactly when because I didn't even realize it was happening, probably from the beginning. From the time we got married, he began get (pause) more and more bad temper[ed] and controlling” (Line 39-41/Lily).

She paused for a few seconds to reflect on how her husband tried to control her activity. For example, he would insist that she did as she was told, even though he knew that it would make her miserable. If she did not comply, he would be bad tempered with her. The frequency and intensity of the explosions of anger grew in time, till he became physical with her even during her pregnancy. That was when she realized she was in an abusive relationship.

“I think eh ... he was physically abusive from the time I was pregnant” (Line 119/Lily).

However, some of her friends caused her to realize that her relationship was not normal as her ex-husband was always checking on her when she was meeting up with them.

“they would complain that he is always phoning me. They would make comment s like “hiya phoning again, too much lah” that kind of thing. So I knew that it was probably not very normal and they thought that he was unreasonable, but what could I do - already stuck! (Line 69-72/Lily)

Though there she had a nagging feeling that something was not right in the relationship, she was committed to making it work.

Lily was actually quite successful in her career as a solicitor before her son was born. She felt that she was also being pressured, even threatened, to quit her job after giving birth to look after her child, though she had intended to continue working.

“ I worked until xxx was born. Then actually I intend[ed] to continue working but I couldn’t find a baby-sitter because the maid we got clearly was not suitable. And my in-law[s] actually threatened to keep the child from the beginning. They say “okay you go back to work, we will keep the child”. So it was a threat lah, either you give up your job or you lose your child. So I gave up my job” (Line 374-378/Lily).

With the subtle threat, Lily felt that she was compelled to choose between her career and leaving her son for the in-laws to take care of. She chose her son.

Lily kept the abuse a secret until her son was a few months old, when she could no longer bear the abuse. The violence had escalated. She had concussion after she was pushed against the wall and knocked her head. She shared with some friends and her church leader. However her cry for help was not answered. She lamented that she had confided in the wrong friends.

“Probably by the time the violence was quite real when he [the son] was [a] few month[s] old and I think I got a concussion. So I think I told friends then, but unfortunately they were the wrong friends. They were not helpful” (Line 120-123/Lily).

She thinks that the church leader’s response perpetuated the situation further as they condemned her for thinking of leaving the relationship even though she was the one being abused. And her friends in whom she confided did not say or do much to help end the abuse.



Though the husband told her not to tell others of the abuse, she eventually did break her silence when the abuse became quite real. The ex-husband switched to psychological abuse when he found out that Lily has told people about the physical abuse resulting in his being embarrassed. He would throw things at her and shout at her in a threatening way.

“At first he told [me] to never tell anyone, in the end I did. When he found out he was very embarrassed so he changed it more from physical to psychological. So he would like throw thing[s] at me and says ‘see I know that won’t hurt you’” (Line 33-35, Lily).

This kind of psychological threat caused her to be fearful all the time, as she never knew when it could become physical. Lily felt like she was walking on eggshells all the time, as she did not know when the husband would explode and she never knew what it was that triggered the explosion.

During those years, Lily remembers always feeling afraid. She was afraid when her husband was away, because she never knew what state he would be in when he came home. She was afraid when he was at home, because she never knew when she might do or say something to trigger his attacks. However, Lily noticed that there was a pattern in her ex-husband’s outbursts of anger and violence, though, she was helpless in preventing it from happening. She was able to see the dark clouds gathering and the rumbling of the building storm. She described it as a frightening experience equivalent to waiting for a volcano to erupt.

“I know that there were cycles that I observed in him where he would go through a period where he was becoming more and more moody. It [was] like a volcano getting ready, can hear the rumbling, getting ready for an explosion” (Line 234-237/Lily).

Lily described weekends as the worst time for her as her husband would be home and there would be more chance of him blowing up. She never knew what would trigger him and cause a blow up but she did notice there were cycles that he would go through where he would be more and more moody culminating in a storm. There was no way she could pacify him when he was in that dark mood. She had to let the storm blow over. When he was in the stormy phase, anything she said or did would cause him to blow up. It felt like walking on eggshells and she often felt scared. I could hear the fear and anger in her voice when she talked about the cycle. Her voice would often rise up when she spoke of his uncontrollable rage and soften when she spoke of her helplessness in such situations. There was nothing she could do. She just had to sit through and endure the frightening moments. All her energy went into keeping the peace with her husband and caring for their son.

“So anything I did would make him angry. If I stay in the room then I will get all kinds of temper thrown at me, it’s like he has lost control and he has to finish his tantrum before it subsides again. So we just have to sit through with it” (Line 246-249/Lily).

She was fearful that he might physically hit her when he was in that angry mood, as he would move toward her in an aggressive way.

“even if he didn’t hit me, he would come around in a very threatening way, in loud and angry voice. And I would be afraid that he would physically hit me because of the way he came toward me in a very aggressive way (Line 252-254/Lily).

The cycle of violence as described by Walker with three distinct phases (the tension building phase, the explosion or acute battering phase followed by a honeymoon respite phase) can be observed in Lily's experiences. But according to Lily, after a while the honeymoon period, with the apologies and promises to change, no longer took place as the ex-husband no longer felt sorry for what he had done. But the tension building phase and the explosions continued. She had to always tip-toe around him in the house and she never knew when she would be hit by the storm once again.

“Initially in the first few years, he would be remorseful, he would say sorry, I shouldn't be like that, I won't be like that, I will change. Then he would be nice, he would do thing[s], try to make up for it. In the end, he no longer thought there was anything wrong with it (voice up) and he became very harden[ed]. So the part of feeling remorse disappeared and actually the cycle, that part of the cycle, drops out. But I still see the time it build[s] up. It would blow up and then nothing could stop him when he's having the tantrum. Nothing could stop him, nothing I did could make him calm down. Ah... then it would ah... calm down a little bit after he had blown up; and, then you could see the darkness building up again and the next storm getting ready” (Line 256-264/Lily).

When Lily talked about her husband not admitting to any wrong in being abusive, I could feel her anger as her voice suddenly became louder and slightly emotional. Lily has to endure many fearful experiences while in the abusive relationship. The words scared, afraid and frightened were repeated throughout the interview as Lily shared her story.

Besides the physical and psychological abuse, Lily shared that her ex-husband had manipulated her into breaking ties with many of her family members and friends on the pretext of protecting her. She felt he especially targeted the friends that he thought might influence Lily's opinion of him or support Lily if she asked for help. Though he did not prevent Lily from seeing her family members and friends, he set terms and conditions as to when she could carry out these activities. She had to be home when he was home from work or during the weekend. It made Lily sad that he almost never went back to visit her family with her and he was rude to her parents, and is so even until today. If she wanted to see her family, she had to go by herself or with her son. And he criticized her family members a lot.

"I think he also isolated me from my friends and family by saying bad things about them. Everybody was bad except him, his family and those people from the church that condoned wife-beating"  
(Line 27-29/Lily 2).

The years of being abused almost took away all her confidence. It was the little confidence that remained that helped her to plan and eventually leave.

Despite the abuse, Lily tried her best to maintain the relationship as she wished to give her son a complete family.

"I genuinely want[ed] to make the family work for the boy's sake, so I did try as much as I could during those times to make the relationship work" (Line 170-172/ Lily).

Lily expressed many times during the interview her desire to make the relationship work: "I genuinely wanted to make it work."/ "I made a genuine effort.". However, her efforts were in vain. Though there were some changes they

were short-lived and after a while her husband refused to admit that there was anything wrong with the relationship. That was when Lily gave up trying, as she realized that it is going nowhere. Though, they went as a couple to some counseling sessions, but her husband would not admit to any wrong on his part. That was when Lily realized that her husband was not going to change his ways:

“And I made [a] genuine effort to reconcile, but the truth is after a while, he went back to his old ways. So then, I knew that counseling or not, he is not going to change ....I knew that that was it lah, he is not going to change. Counseling was making no progress, he didn’t want to admit [to doing] anything wrong” (Line 212-218, Lily).

Besides losing hope in the relationship improving, it was fear for her personal safety and also of losing custody of her child that led her to leave earlier than planned, when she saw another very dark storm building up.

“So actually in November 2005, I saw the storm build up- very, very dark. I was very frightened. I suspected by then he knew I had given up on the relationship - that I wanted to walk out. So then I got very scare[d]. I was really scare[d] for my own personal safety. I was scared he would get his father to take away the child from me” (Line 264-268/Lily).

Also the input that she had had from professionals and her friends overseas - that she need not continue to live in an abusive relationship, as it was not good for her or her son - influenced her decision.

“Actually it help[ed] that I had input from a psychologist in U.S. He told me that ... and my friend[s] in [the] U.S. and Australia told me that ... XX is more traumatized by watching his father abuse me repeatedly; and that it would be less traumatic in making one break and walk out then. Because there is one break, we move on with our lives instead of every time the abuse happens, you try to get over it and then it happens again and again and you can’t get out. And it is the same for the kid, so

that was actually the key point for me, the turning point, when I realized it” (Line 103-110/Lily).

Only when the reality set in for her, when she saw that it is more traumatizing for her son to constantly witness the father’s abuse of her and the fact that she saw her own mental health going downhill did she begin to seriously to plan her exit. She mentioned this input from the specialist and from friends as the key point, the turning point for her. They affirmed what she had in mind, desiring to leave the abusive relationship though she was unsure how it might affect her son.

“From [the] beginning [of] 2005 that’s when my friend beg[a]n to tell me that; and that’s when I even heard it from the therapist around March; so that confirm[ed] it. It confirm[ed] what I had in my mind, but [I] was very unsure of when it was really time to move, because previously I have [to] stay on wanting to keep the family whole for the boy”(Line 113-117/Lily).

This realization set in only after many years, but once it set in it did not take long for Lily to begin thinking of her next step. In March 2005, she heard from the United State therapist and in May 2005 she went to Singapore - a short escape from the abusive environment to think through her whole situation. Her cousin provided a safe place for her to stay and to think through what to do. She was prepared to find a job and stay on in in Singapore, but that did not work out.

“She just gave me a place to sit down and be safe; and to have space in my head to think through what to do. They gave us food, shelter. They were very supportive in their community (Line 187-189/ Lily).

While she was thinking through her next move, she was encouraged to reconcile if possible and she was willing to give it another try.

“And the plan was try to again. They also wanted me to reconcile if possible, because they thought it would be good. I was also willing to let them help” (Line 192-193/Lily).

Upon returning to Malaysia, she and her husband went for counseling with a pastor from another church. It was during this period, from July to October 2005, that the pastor was able to help her negotiate for the husband to rent a place for her and her son on the basis that she needed space. They continued the counseling, but by October Lily knew that it was not going anywhere despite her genuine effort to reconcile, as the husband did not want to admit to any wrong. Her face showed signs of tiredness when she was sharing about the powerlessness she felt in attempting to reconcile the relationship. The words ‘no hope’ were repeated four times.

“By October, I knew that that was it lah, he was not going to change. Counseling was making no progress, he didn’t want to admit anything wrong. The counselor told him that even your tone of voice is scary to me and he would not believe or do anything except wait for me to change. So I knew, okay. No hope and no hope in Malaysia. I tried how many months, no hope in Malaysia, no hope in Singapore” (Line 217-221/Lily).

She shared the sense of helplessness she felt when contemplating leaving. Since she was not working, she was financially dependent upon him. When contemplating leaving, financial issues weighed heavily on Lily; she described her experience:

“Then it was difficult because I was not financially independent” (Line 21/Lily).

Not only did the financial issue weigh heavily on her, she was concerned with the custody of the child and also finding a safe place to go to. To her, the obstacles were great then.

“When I thought of leaving, the obstacles were so great. I was not financially independent, I had no way of supporting the boy. I had nowhere to go and then there is always the thought that they will snatch the boy away from me....I still had no income of my own. So I knew I [was] still at his mercy financially. So again, I had no means to leave” (Line 148-151/Lily).

The phrase “I have no means to leave” tells of her sense of despair in trying to leave but not being able to due to the obstacles she faced. She repeated this many times during the interview. But she also knew that somehow she had to leave, as it was getting intolerable. She noticed that her mental health was deteriorating.

“Actually it was an impossible situation, it really was, but it was also intolerable. I knew that if I stay[ed] I would mentally go downhill very badly. So I knew I had to leave even though I knew I couldn’t. I ha[d] no money, I had nowhere to go” (Line 174-176/Lily).

Afraid for her personal safety as she saw the dark clouds gathering again, She left on 30 November on the pretext of visiting a friend in Australia rather than in the middle of December as she had earlier planned. She told her friend of her fears and asked if she could come to visit earlier and her friend agreed.

She shared that her family members and religious leaders were against her leaving. Lily’s family, especially her mother, was not in favor of her leaving despite knowing that she was being physically abused by her husband. She just encouraged her to pray more about the situation and not leave. They thought Lily was being silly in wanting to leave:



“My family were not supportive at all. They thought that I should reconcile and thought that I was being silly” (Line 300-301/Lily)

In fact, this unsupportive attitude made Lily feel even more helpless. She lamented:

“My family was not supportive at all. In fact th[at] was one of the difficulties that I ha[d]. That my mother would, if I came back for food or for some company, I would be faced with my mother’s questioning: [] “So when you are going to get back? What are you doing to get back together”, because she would not accept that I would walk out of a relationship” (Line 302-306/ Lily).

She was frustrated by her mother’s belief that prayer would solve the problem for her. Her mother also questioned what she was doing to make the relationship work. So whenever she went home she felt that she was being psychologically battered. Though she knew that parents would house her if she did leave, she knew she would have to live with her mother’s psychological battering.

“I knew my parents would never let me starve, but I [would] have to put up with the psychological battering. It felt like battering, even though she meant well, but that is what it felt like” (Line 316-318/Lily).

I could see the sadness on her face when she talked about how when someone so close to her, such as her mother, did not understand what she had gone through and tried to make her reconcile with an abusive husband who did not want to change.

Lily found her own church leaders’ attitude to her disclosure of abuse to be unhelpful, even to the point of being damaging. She was very disheartened by their comments because they made her feel condemned and made her to feel it was all her fault:

“I think especially the church leaders - they were just condemning about it. I think my friends just didn’t say much, but they didn’t say or do very much. The church leader[s] were upright, to me lah. I think they perpetuated it because they say “[It] is all your fault, you are sinning to think for leaving, repent now”. I think they were far more off-putting!” (Line 135-139/Lily).

Instead of being a source of support, the religious leaders heaped guilt upon her, making her think it was a sin to leave. The church strongly discouraged her from leaving. To Lily, instead of being a source of help, the church was another source of pain:

“I think there were thoughts of leaving, but they were quickly extinguished by church leader[s] who t[old] me that I must repent” (Line 147-178/Lily).

All her thoughts of leaving in the early years were squashed by the church leaders’ remarks.

What encouragement she did not receive from family and church leaders, she received from her God and her friends residing overseas. Even though her family did not support her leaving initially, Lily found great support from her friends and eventually her family came around to support her. This was what Lily had to say about friends who supported her leaving:

“Friends, friends who understand me, ah, who supported me. And actually my friends went very far, especially my friends who are overseas. Ah my friend in America sent me money and she constantly supported me. She would call me up and say you have come a million miles and [was] just really encouraging. Ah ... and she was really there. My friends in Australia w[ere] really amazing, one of them gave me a place to stay. We stayed with her for quite a long time. In fact she said stay as long as you want to, but her mother came and her mother couldn’t stand xxx so we had to leave. It became quite volatile. Her mother is a very fierce lady so we had to go. But she [my friend] has been there all along. And in fact my family gave so little support, I think, she in a way - we grew up in same school - she is like a big sister

so she took on the role. She took on the role of being family to me and she has been ever since” (Line 502-513/Lily).

When her family was not supportive of her decision to leave, Lily was fortunate to have friends who not only provided moral but also financial support and shelter for her and her son. Not only did they provide for her physically, they also encouraged her emotionally and gave her moral support, telling her that she had come a long way.

And when she had to move out from the friend’s house, another friend paid for her rent when she could not afford it all by herself:

“Another friend also, she paid for my rent for a year, or half the amount, but it was a huge amount at that time when I didn’t have much. And I was struggling financially and that help[ed] a lot. She help[ed] with things like mattresses, we didn’t have mattresses to sleep on, bed sheets, household thing[s]” (Line 517-520/Lily).

It was the moral support her friends gave her that was instrumental in making it possible for her to stand firm in her decision. These friends were like a family to her. They took care of her physical needs such as housing and household items and cheered her on along the way. It was clear that her friends’ support sustained her in maintaining her decision to leave. And eventually her family also came around to supporting her:

“But I think [of] the friends that have stuck by me as family; and eventually my family came around and became very supportive, and they have learned to accept it. We just don’t talk about going back. They have learnt to accept me and I am still their daughter, still their sister. Eventually, I think my family has come around and I have them back. Ah, in fact, my cousins, some of them, even when my parents didn’t understand, my uncle stood by me. Ah, my cousins, extended family also mean a lot. And friends who have adopted me as family. That has also meant a lot” (Line 561-569/Lily).

The acceptance of her friends and family in respecting her decision to leave was also important in enabling her to hold on to her decision to move on in her life. It was the friends who stood by her that saw her through the initial years of leaving.

Though Lily was displeased by her experience with some of the church leaders she first confided in about the abuse, she maintained her faith and continued to rely on God for her sanity:

“In spite of what people say, God never condemn[ed] me. I think that kept me going, that kept me sane, that kept me with some sense of self-esteem. That God did not condone the abuse and did not blame me and that He is in the midst of [the] hopeless situation, [I] still have hope. So that was what kept me going. I used to go to Bible study and that helped also. I think it was Bible study that gave me lots of hope. I read [the Bible]. In passages that I read, there was assurance that He is watching over us. That He will take care of His people. And also interesting through the Bible study, I came across the passage that said: “God said to his people, I hate the man covering himself with violence as with [a] garment” and that said a lot to me. Because all the while the church condoned domestic violence but here God said I hate violence and in fact that came in the same breath as I hate divorce. So to me that was very reassuring.” (Line 457-469/ Lily).

It was through Bible reading that she maintained her hope and assurance of God’s care for her. Despite what the church members said, she was convinced that God did not condemn her and it meant a lot to her. She is comforted by the fact that God hates violence when her church condoned it and felt reassured of her decision to leave her abusive husband.

She also shared that it was God that helped her maintain a sense of sanity while in the abusive relationship.

“I think being a Christian, my relationship with God that was the main [reason]. That was what kept me sane, ah my time of prayer. There was time at night where I couldn’t sleep because it was so scary, my time of prayer” (Line 454-456/Lily).

In a nutshell, she shared that it is important not to condemn women who decide to leave. She felt what really helped her was knowing that it was not a selfish thing to leave as many would say. It is as it is more traumatic for the child to stay in a broken home and repeatedly see his mother being abused. This is what she said about leaving:

“I think briefly, in [a] nut shell, some of the things that really help[ed] me to leave was ah, I think [the] for myself [it] is knowing that it is not a selfish thing to leave. That really the child is more traumatized by staying in a broken home and repeatedly seeing his mother being abused. That was more traumatic than leaving, that was key” (Line 486-486/Lily).

She was very pleased with the affirmation she received from the Australian judge who actually commended her for doing the right thing in protecting her son by leaving.

“Really, I think it struck me a lot that when I went to the Australian court to get the judgment, the Australian court actually wrote that I protected xxx by doing it, protecting him from the abuse because my ex-husband was subjecting him to emotional abuse by the domestic violence. So I think that is very consoling. That comes from the judge. When I am condemning myself, even the judge said it is the right thing to do”(Line 86-91/Lily).

That written judgment by the Australian court gave her lots of comfort, assuring her that she had done the right thing by leaving countering the condemnation that she had received from her church leaders for leaving. Her smile showed me how pleased she was with the Australian's judge's statement.

Besides the realization that it was not a selfish thing to do, it was her faith in God helping her to do the impossible and the friends who understood and supported her that enabled her to follow through with her decision.

“So it was my faith in God also knowing that it was for the best of the child to leave an abusive situation. Friends, friends who understand me, ah, who supported me” (Line 500-502/Lily).

All this would not have worked out well if Lily had not had a prior plan. For Lily, her exit plan came together gradually. When she gave up hope for the relationship, she began actively planning her exit in an orderly manner. First, she sought a lawyer's advice in obtaining a parenting order for the child.

“The violence happened many years before I went to see the lawyer. I went to see the lawyer basically after I ha[d] decided to leave. Around April 2005, I went to see her about getting [a] parenting order [for] the child.” (Line 414-416/Lily).

Lily also took the child and went to stay in the other apartment, away from the marital home, for half of the time. So the husband would not be so suspicious of her not being home all the time.

“It was at the time between April and December 2005. We were already living partly out at our other apartment. So we were not living at home every day, it was like a half-half kind of thing, half a week here, half a week there” (Line 606-608/Lily).

Lily's leaving was a quiet act. There were no dramatic announcements, no angry scenes, no fiery showdown. She was purportedly staying with her parents for an extended time. So eventually she took the child and escaped overseas before the husband could stop her. She applied for a divorce from there. When she saw a very dark storm building and was really afraid, she went to stay with her parents and informed her husband that she proposed to stay there for an extended period but, in actual fact, she was quietly arranging for a flight out to Australia.

“I was purportedly staying with my parents for [an] extended period and my parents help[ed] me to keep quiet about it. They were very distressed when I went. When I went, they kept very quiet about this. They didn't tell him” (Line 589-592/Lily).

Her parents helped to keep her exit plan a secret from her husband. I could see from her expression that it felt like a very critical moment that she got out just in time. Her husband actually was getting a bit suspicious when they stayed away for too long and began to call her. However, she ignored all the phone calls and managed to get on the plane and leave before he could do anything.

“I think we stayed away a bit too long and we got lots of phone calls but thank God we got the most phone calls before we boarded the plane. I just ignore[d] the phone call[s] for about a day. Before the suspicions got too bad, thank God, I was on the plane and out of the country” (Line 618-621/Lily).

In her own words, she said “I made it by the skin of my teeth” and she believed it to be a divine plan for her as she managed to get permanent residence status in Australia allowing her to stay on. And she made this statement twice.

She actually went to Australia with a tourist visa and applied for a student visa there and later got permanent residence status.

Lily was happy that she finally managed to end the abusive relationship and she is thankful to God for bringing her so far. There was a smile on her face when she recalled her revisit to Singapore.

“when I revisit[ed] Singapore where I initially tried to get away and [remembered] the hopelessness then was just enormous - that made me realize how far we have come and made me very thankful to God and gave me hope for the future” (Line 653-655/Lily).

Not only did she now have hope for the future after leaving, she also felt at peace. Lily said that her fear of her own mental state going downhill was one of the factors prompting her to leave and after leaving she found her mental health improving.

“Ah but I think life is definitely better and definitely happier without him. Because I can go home and have peace and quiet and [am] no longer subjected to the constant fear of going home, that you [are] never safe anywhere. So I think my mental health is better and I am not as anxious, [I’m] happier” (Line 395-398/Lily).

Lily is now much happier and and less anxious. She is no longer afraid of going home and she now feels safe there. She is thankful for the unconditional support of her friends and more recently of her family and grateful to God for sustaining her and keeping her sane. She believes that God has got a bigger plan for her and is able to bring a phoenix out of ashes.



## **Orchid**

Orchid told me her story in the living room of the bungalow that she bought, six months after she had left her husband for good. She proudly told me that she bought the house through her own effort and was thankful for God's provision of such a beautiful house with a garden. It was nicely done up and as she was waiting for a visa to go abroad for her postgraduate study, some of her belongings were in boxes. But the basic furnishings of the house were still there and there on the central wall of the hall was a large graduation portrait. She told me with great pride that it was a photo of her graduation for her master's degree. As I gazed at the portrait on the wall, a confident woman and a lovely boy looked back at me.

Orchid and her husband met each other on Labor Day in 1998, while on vacation at Taman Negara. She was there visiting a friend. Her husband-to-be was holidaying there with a group of friends. It was a happy time. Orchid recalled how they met each other, the fun they had for the few days at Taman Negara, how he followed her and asked for her contact details. She was laughing heartily when mentioning bumping into him and the bunch of guys again on the highway back to Kuala Lumpur. It was a happy beginning. They dated for a year and got married. And then her nightmare began. She admitted that while dating everything was fine as people can hide and only show their good side to others. The true colors were only revealed after they married. She was shocked by her husband's controlling nature - everything had to be his way! Within a few weeks of their marriage, Orchid realized that she was in trouble. It began with feet

washing. Orchid was confused, she works in an office and not on a farm, yet she was made to wash her feet before entering the house. After the feet washing incident, her husband's campaign to control her escalated. First it was her cleanliness, then it was her tidiness in the house, the way forks and spoons are cleaned.

According to Orchid, her husband was a control freak and in retrospect, she thought that he seemed to have an obsessive compulsive behavior. She compared her life with that of the wife in the movie "Sleeping with the Enemy", because everything had to be his way. The towel has to be lined up in a particular way. The cleaning should be done in a certain way as well. Everything in the house had to be neat and clean and things put in the designated place. She had to wash her feet with soap every time before entering the house. It was a torturous routine that she had to abide by every day.

"I work in an office, not in the jungle, not in the *ladang* (field) or whatsoever. Every day, I want to come into the house, I must wash my feet with soap. Then he made sure I did that every day. And that's a real torture to me" ( Line 45-47/Orchid).

The feet washing before entering the house was just one of the many rules that her husband set for her and he made sure that she complied with them as he would check up on her. I could see her frustration when she talked about her husband's compulsive behavior. Orchid actually did have cold feet one week before her wedding. She wanted to call the wedding off as she sensed that something was wrong with her husband-to-be. They were quarreling a lot over their wedding plans, over minor things. She wanted to tell her parents to call off

the wedding, but had no heart to after seeing all the excitement and preparation that had taken place. She noticed that he was a very egoistical man. Everything had to be his way.

“A week before we got married, I sense[d] something wrong with this guy. We quarrel[ed] about the wedding planning, this and that. So actually I didn’t want to get married already but because I consider[ed] my parents in the *kampong* (village), all the preparation[s] have been done, this and that. I didn’t want, I want[ed] to save their face so I okay, just get married” (Line 57-60/Orchid).

Though, she was prepared for what was to come in her married life knowing some of her husband’s ways before the wedding, what followed the wedding was still a shock for her.

“After we married, everything had to be his way. It was a shock to me” (Line 43/Orchid).

“He is so much into his ego, I am a man, you must follow me, this is the way we must do it” (Line 74/Orchid).

Besides making sure that she abides by his rules, he actually hurt her physically two months after their marriage. Bruises on her body were a normal sight in her married life. .

“So he is the one that is a bad tempered kind of person. So when he is angry, he.. he.. he picked on me. Every time I have bruises on my body, all the time” (Line 86-87/Orchid).

Though after each fight or beating he would promise to change, the changes were only temporary. He would revert back to his own self after a few months. So after six months into her marriage, she knew in her heart that she had to depend on herself.

Reflection led to action. There was no dramatic action but Orchid knew she needed to invest further in her own education. She enrolled herself in a degree course so that she could be independent.

“After 6 months married, I enrolled in a degree program. I say I want [to] because I don’t see any future with him so I say I have to depend on myself. I can’t depend on him, I must go back to] study” (Line 93-94/Orchid).

Though her husband did not like the idea of her studying, he could not stop her as she financed the study herself.

“So enroll part time. Saturday and Sunday I went for my degree. He [did] not really like the idea of me going back to study. I say never mind, I will never ask one cent of money for the study. I will finance my own study” (Line 97-99/Orchid).

We often hear the saying “home sweet home” and the picture of hell is far removed from the word ‘home’. However for Orchid, home was where the torture began. She compared her married life then to living in hell. Bruises and verbal outbursts were part of her daily life. She wore long sleeves to cover up her blue black bruises. I could see anger written over her face as she talked about the daily fights that she used to have with her husband.

“We fight every day for stupid reasons. Because of the spoon, because of the handkerchief, which to me, o my, I can’t take this torture. I don’t deserve to be treated like this. Now I think I live in hell (Line 50-53/Orchid).

Every day was like living in war zone for her. She had to answer for why the spoon was not clean or the handkerchief not folded the way he had instructed her. Fights will break out as result of such argument. It was like a daily torture for her

constantly going through such scenes. She walked out of the relationship for the first time when she was three months pregnant, after a bad fight with her husband. She described that incident as the worst she had experienced in her marriage. He threatened to throw her down to the ground from their apartment on the third level. She then tried to run away and he took a knife, threatening to kill them both if she was to walk out. She knew that things were getting out of hand and in order to calm him down, she had to pretend that she would not leave.

“[at] that time I want[ed] to run away, he want[ed] to stop me. He said if you want to go away, we [will] die together. That time he psycho already, I know if I stick to my decision, both of us have to die. So I have to say ok-lah, I stay with you okay. Okay I stay with you, say okay-lah, I stay with you okay because I want[ed] to pacify him that night. If not, I die already. The knife is still in the *balai polis* (police station) in Petaling Jaya” (Line 361-366/Orchid).

After her husband finally calmed down, she went to report the incident to the police. Her husband was remanded and she called her parents to remove all the things in the house for her. Her father came from Kuantan and brought all the things in the house back to her hometown.

“I make a police report, eh, police remanded him. Then I called my parents in Kuantan. Came and take all my things from the house. I vacated the house because everything in the house belonged to me. So I just took everything, I emptied the house and went back to Kuantan” (line 110-113/Orchid).

She went to stay with a friend as she was still working and studying in the Klang valley. After being released, the husband went around searching for her. He found her after three months and begged her for forgiveness and promised to change.

She had sympathy for him and also for the sake of the baby, she gave him a chance on the basis that he promised to change and she went back to him.

“So after 3 months, he finally found me. And he[was] so skinny, like a walking skeleton. So he came back to me, say I will be change. I will not do this again, blah, blah, blah all this kind of story lah. So for the sake of the baby, I think, ya, maybe he got the baby you know, he will change.” (Line 117-120/Orchid)

But the changes were not long lasting, the abuses continued on and the controlling behavior carried on.

Orchid called her ex-husband an obsessive compulsive person as he continued to make sure that she washed her feet with soap every single time before she entered the house. No guest was allowed into the house because they would contaminate the house. She was not allowed to cook even for their baby as it would dirty the house. To Orchid, fights and bruises were a constant part of her life. Verbal outburst and threats were just a fact of life. I could see the frustration on her face when shared about those times when she had to juggle the baby, studies, work and also coping with her husband’s abusive behavior. She called it ‘four in one’. But she was thankful that she managed to get through that time and finally graduate.

“That time I juggle my life with working, having small baby, study and fighting with husband, all in one go, ok. So eh thank God [I] managed to get through [and in] three-and-a-half or 4 years I graduated” (Line 106-108/Orchid).

In the midst of all the fights, she often warned her husband that he may one day come home and see only the floor and ceiling.

Although Orchid's husband was verbally abusive throughout their relationship, he was not able to convince her that she was not a worthy person or that she was a stupid person. She was able to dismiss his denigrating comments such as "stupid" and "useless". She attributed this to the army training that she received which helped her to brush aside all her husband's abusive words and also not to show any emotion to her husband.

"He scolds me with the words this and that. Not only physical but thank God I trained in the army before. You were trained in physical and psychological torture, whatever you say, *masuk sini, keluar sini* (one ear in and one ear out)" (Line 305-307/Orchid).

She realized she was not the things that he was calling her. She was not stupid in any way and she could support herself financially and completed her studies. She was proud of her own achievements despite the misery she experienced, while her husband's academic achievement was no match for hers.

"He always called me stupid. Ya, I am stupid, go to university several times, my certificates is like this not like you, three, four times SPM also failed" (Line 310-312/Orchid).

Not only was her ex-husband abusive and controlling, he was also extremely jealous and suspicious of her having a boyfriend besides him. He would check her handphone to see if there was any man calling her.

"He is an obsessive guy, he thought I have a guy outside. Every time I *balik rumah* (come home), he would take my handphone and check, scroll calls out, [for] any received number from guys" (Line 619-621/Orchid).

She was upset that he invaded her privacy and did not trust her. Even if she switched off the handphone, he would still demand her password. She described a time when she refused to provide the password to her phone, he hit her so hard with a cane that it caused her skin to split.

“*Masuk rumah* (reach home), switch off the handphone. So when he wants to check, off. So you want on, password. Say, “hey give me your password”. “*Tak ada*” (nope). “Give me your password, I want to check your phone”. Can you believe that, is like invade your privacy and you don’t trust me as your wife. Then one time he asked me, I say *tak ada* (Nope). .... *Dia ambil* (he took the) *cane itu*, “*piak*” *sampai belakang sini sampai sini* (show from top to the bottom of the back) *pecah kulit I tahu* (the skin split open)” (Line 622-628/Orchid).

She was thankful that due to her army training, she is able to endure the pain and remain tough. At times she would even fight back.

Orchid left her husband for a second time when her son was around one year old. She just could not stand the constant abuse and warned him that she would leave one day, but he just ignored her warning.

Then one day she actually left the day after he abused her yet again.

“When we fight, I always tell him if you keep on treating me like this, one day you [will] come back [and] only see the ceilings and the floor. [I warned] him many times. He ignored what I say. Ok that day has come, the day did come” ( Line 131-133/Orchid).

Actually, prior to the leaving, she already had made plans to leave, months before. She was offered a job to work in Pahang, which was near to her parents’ home. She quietly accepted the job, changed her address, transferred her study to the Kuantan campus, and all that without her husband knowing.



“Second time, I have an offer [from] one company to work in Pahang, which is near my parents. I secretly arrange that work to cover Pahang and [be] stationed in Pahang” (Line 128-129/Orchid).

So when her husband began beating her again, she just took her things and left for Kuantan. This was the second time Orchid left her husband. This time around the baby was about one year old, her leaving was much more planned. She quietly took up the job offer that stationed her nearer to her hometown. She then moved back to stay with her parents.

“Okay that day has come, the day did come. After we had a quarrel that time, with me blue black all over my body. So er, so I just took all my things, I moved back to Kuantan and lived there, worked there” (Line 133-135/Orchid).

During the one year that she was staying with her parents, her husband faithfully travelled every weekend to Kuantan to visit her and the baby. During those visits, he was good to her and after a year, he pleaded with her to go back to him.

“So every weekend, Saturday, Sunday he comes. He comes then Sunday he *balik* (go back) KL because he [has] got to work. Ok without [a] miss for one year. For one year, every Saturday, Sunday, he will take a bus to Kuantan and then come back. One year, we didn’t quarrel [at] that time because [the visit was for a] short while only” (Line 143-146/Orchid).

On the grounds that for the one year he was behaving himself and the fact that the child needed a father, she decided to give him a second chance and went back with him to Puchong with their son. She thought that he might have learnt his lesson.

“Then he said, come back and live in the new house, this and that. That was June 2002. So [in] June 2002, I moved back to his house in Puchong and got back to KL there because I want[ed] to give him a second chance, maybe he [had]learnt his lesson already.”(Line 149-152/Orchid).

If, however, Orchid had harbored a secret hope that the husband would change, she would be disappointed. Their marriage continued along the same path it had been on from the beginning, only it was worse this time. She later discovered that it was her worst nightmare as now she was living in his house. Orchid’s husband did not allow her to bring any friends home, even her family members. Her activities at home and ways of handling things were all controlled by the husband. It all had to be done his way.

“Living in his own house made him more arrogant, [demanding I] comply with all the rules of the house. He has as an obsessive compulsive behavior. So I am like a, you know, a slave inside the house. I can’t cook because I mess up the kitchen..... Living with him, nobody can come to the house because well people outside don’t wash their feet properly. They will make our house dirty this and that. They cannot come, my family cannot come. Okay so I have to live by his law” (Line 160-166/Orchid).

The controlling nature of Orchid’s husband caused her to feel like she was just a slave in the house rather than a wife to a husband; everything had to be done his way!

And his cleanliness routine drove her nuts. She got so tired of quarrelling because of such things.

“I have to wash the feet using the soap. If I come back earlier, he will ask “*cuci kaki tak? Cuci kenapa slipper tak basah* (did you wash your feet? Why is it that your slipper is not wet if you washed?) and I say next time you put a log book there, I chopped and signed or you put a CCTV there and we start to quarrel about that stupid thing, everyday, everyday. Is ay, my god, it really insults my intelligence, I don’t want to quarrel about this stupid thing” (Line 168-170/Orchid).

Any quarrels ended with her being beaten so she chose to remain silent after a while. She finally walked out of the house once again after one year. And this time, it was the final exit.

”Until one stage, I stayed there, I didn’t want to talk with him. If we talk, we quarrel. If we quarrel, most likely I’ll get blue and black. So I just play smart, do what you want to do, when the time comes, I will walk out of this house and it will be for good” (Line 191-193/Orchid).

She did walk out in June 2003. When asked what brought her to the point of no return, she said it was the cumulative torture that she had been experiencing; and, also the realization that he was not going to change in any way. She even told her mother-in-law in front of her husband that if she continued to stay on, one day, either she would be crazy enough to kill her husband or she would end up being killed by him.:

“...that torture that he gives me every day... the accumulative torture. I said that in front of him to my mother-in-law, in front of the old lady: If I stay with this guy, if I am crazy ... if I don’t kill him, he will kill me, one [of us] will die” (Line199-202/Orchid).

She had given him a few chances, but this did not make any difference. At last Orchid realized that he was not going to change:

“He is not going to change. I told him even the river can change, from crooked [and] become straight. Mountains can change but not a person like you, not a man” (Line 232-233/Orchid).

She was disappointed and she realized that one day when she could not take it anymore she might end up killing her husband or he would kill her. She decided that it was better to walk out than to remain and face such possibilities.

“[It] is a matter of time when the time will come when one day I [will] be killed. It is a [just a]matter of [whether] he dies or I die. He dies, when I cannot control my anger anymore, most probably he will die. Most probably I will die when I fight back. Either one, so I walk out” (Line 372-375/ Orchid).

When Orchid contrasted her life as a single and then as a married person, she realized that she had been happier as a single person. It dawned on her that she wanted to be treated with respect and not be abused. She deserved a better life as her mother had not given birth to her to go through such suffering. She knew that she did not deserve to be abused.

“No, I say to myself, I don’t deserve to be treated like this. I deserve a better life than this. Even though I am single, I am happy. I deserved happiness in life. I told him my mother gave birth to me[and] almost sacrificed her life for me to be happy in this world, not to be treated [in this way] by someone like you.” (Line 215-218/Orchid).

Orchid realized that she would be much happier being single. So she made up her mind to be a single mother rather than remain in the abusive relationship. Many times she mentioned the phrase “I don’t deserve to be treated like this”. She was

keenly aware no one should be subject to such an abusive lifestyle. This insight caused her to begin planning for her exit. Her philosophy was that if she cannot have a good life with the man she married, then leave.

“Ya because I know I will never have a good life with you, so why should I stay, so I [will] stay somewhere else lah, [and] go out from that horrible life” (Line 410-411/Orchid).

Though it sounded as if Orchid managed to leave effortlessly, she did hold fears of an uncertain future. She went to the Legal Aid Bureau to get a lawyer to file for divorce, but after two years her case was never mentioned. So she closed the case in the Klang valley and hired a lawyer to finalize her divorce, when she could afford it two years after her final exit.

She is a resourceful lady. When she walked out for the last time, she did not have much money with her but she was able to buy a house after six months. I could see the smile on her face when she proudly shared how she managed to buy the house after she walked without her husband giving her a single cent.

“So I came to Melaka. I got a job. I didn’t have money when starting a job here. God is so great, after 6 months I bought this house. I bought this house after 6 months work. I came to Melaka. I didn’t have [any] money. I just bring my son and I don’t know anyone” (Line 238-241/Orchid).

She did not ask for child support or alimony, she just wanted her freedom. Being a single mother, she was not concerned about other people’s view of her.

She is proud that she is able to raise the son on her own, single-handedly.

“I don’t care what people [say] about me. It’s me that I care about. I don’t care and I don’t give a damn. I am a single mum, so what? ... I don’t even think twice about going out as a single mother. I don’t even think. I am proud to be single mother, raise my son without my husband giving me single cent, even today” (L254-259/Orchid1).

The stark facts of Orchid’s escape and her new life might sound as though she blossomed effortlessly into an independent single mother. In fact, she told me, though she was happy to be free of her husband, she was concerned as to who would take care of her son if she were to fall ill. The uncertainty of the future loomed in her heart, at times. And she made sure that her son was always with her even though she had to rely on a nanny to help her take care of him. She did not want her son grow up without her, so despite having to work, she did not just send her son to her parents. Instead, she scouted for a nanny to help her.

For her, long term planning was the key to her final exit from the abusive relationship. Her advice to women in abusive relationships is to begin making yourself financially independent of the abuser and plan to leave regardless of the duration of the plan. It does not matter how long it takes. It begins with a small step. Each of the small plans that she made helped her to eventually walk out.

“Make some long term planning, do something first. You can walk away, it’s not like you decide today you [will] walk away tomorrow. Like myself also, I don’t foresee my future with him. I make stages of preparation. First, my BBA (Bachelor of Business Administrations) ... I studied then I got a better job. I didn’t just walk out like that. You make preparations, you can walk out, maybe not today, maybe in two or three years time” (L341-346/Orchid1).

She did not just dream about a better life, she prepared and planned for her own future. She thought through the timing, what she needed to prepare. Besides planning to make herself more financially able, she invested in herself by upgrading her education, she also talked about how to go about having all her important correspondence diverted a few weeks before she left.

She actually had this all sorted out before she left the marital home.

“I didn’t even dream to do one [thing] after another, but again it’s about planning. That is the thing, it’s about planning. I didn’t wake up one morning [and decide], I want to walk away from this house. No, I think well, ya I want to walk away, but when? What is the preparation I must do first? That is why before[hand], I still remember one time I [was] in Sg Buloh, I sent letters [requesting] the address for all my correspondence [be changed]; please change [also] my bank account to this address. I diverted everything to this address before I moved out, which I did 2-3 weeks before I moved out. I sent [letters] to all, my phone bill, everything, [was] diverted to my home address so I was very well prepared. The day I go out, I have nothing left behind which I have to come back to do. No, nothing.” (Line 804-812/Orchid).

She did not want to have any reason to return to the marital home after she left so she planned ahead. As I looked at the vibrant woman seated across from me, I cannot help but salute her for her bravery and her tenacity in remaining independent of her husband.

Besides planning for her future, she also made a police report of the abuse. However, she lamented that the police report did not actually bring an end to the abusive situation; it only served as a record. Orchid speaks angrily about the police officers who kept her running from department to department the first time

she made the police report. It took her a long time from police report to medical check-up. She was disappointed with the long processes.

“you have to go lah, running from one side to another - one end to another. That time I was 3 months or 4 months pregnant, blue black all over my body. I have to spend ... spend half a day in the *balai polis* (police station) in PJ state okay. [It was not until 7 o'clock [that] I finished there. [Then] I had to go to UH [the University Hospital] to have a medical checkup then after that [it wasn't until] 9.00 o'clock or 10 o'clock (at night) that I finished. I had to go to the pharmacy to [get some] medicine. [It was then that] I looked at my watch, I [was] so tired” (Line 701-706/Orchid).

Despite the long ordeal, Orchid insisted on making the police report. For Orchid, making police reports and keeping copies of medical reports would serve as court evidence in future, though it did not help to end the abuse then and there. With each of the police reports and medical reports, it strengthened her desire to leave. Each report seemed to spur her one step closer to the exit plan.

“You have to make a police report otherwise you will have nowhere to start. You have to make [one]. If you don't make [one], you are not starting from anywhere, you've got to make [one]. But making a police report [can be] a hassle which sometimes doesn't bring you anywhere also. But at least you have the evidence. I made the reports, compiled them over the years ... like this already (gesture the thickness). Even the medical report ... I have to go to the hospital to buy the medical report, to get back this and that. So that I knew if I were to file for divorce in the court, these are all the evidence. You know I just keep it” (Line 675-683/Orchid).

Orchid was thankful to have supportive parents when she was leaving. They did not condemn her nor question her decision; they believed in her and gave her whatever help she needed, like helping her to move her furniture.



“Thank God, my family are quite supportive. They helped me in a way. They didn’t say that my decision was wrong when I walked out. They didn’t say that. They knew [that what] I did was the best for me and my son” (Line 378-380/Orchid).

They trusted and respected her decision. Orchid was also appreciative of friends who stood by her and gave her encouragement while she was going through her ordeal. Though they did not do much to help her end the abuse, they lent a listening ear, encouraged her and gave her moral support which kept her going.

“Close friends, they keep on encouraging me, gave me support in [whatever] way they could, that kept me going ... that’s all” (Line 383-384/Orchid).

The only frustration she faced in leaving was when she had to attend marriage counseling as required by the Syariah court where the religious leader pleaded with her to change her mind and give her husband another chance. But she was firm in her decision. Her family was supportive of her decision and her friends gave her the moral support she needed. She was also financially independent.

She planned well compiling and keeping all the police and medical reports of the abuse over the years as evidence for her to show in court. She summed up her life by quoting Margaret Thatcher: “Women are like a tea-bag, you don’t know how strong it is till you put it in hot water” (L759-760/Orchid1). She was put through hot water and came out strong. She credited it to God who strengthened her in the midst of all this.

## **Rose**

Rose acknowledges that she is much luckier than many other abused women: she had a successful career, no financial ties to her ex-husband though she fought for the maintenance of the children and also pressed charges against the husband for the physical assault. She had the luxury of simply turning the page and beginning again. Rose has become active in domestic violence prevention. She frequently uses her authority as a lawyer to advocate for abused women. When asked what kept her going she mentioned it as her desire to protect her children which spurred her on. She did not want her children to be exposed to her husband's immoral lifestyle. Life, she concludes, has been good to her. She believes all the experiences have allowed her to be a better person. True, she had to go through the ordeal of pressing charges and defending herself in court. But it seems as though she walked away essentially unscathed. She attributed this to God's sustaining power. Rose looks so together and in charge of her life.

Rose and her husband met while studying at university. They got married in 1995 and the first three years of their marriage were great. But things began to change when she was pregnant with their first son. She found out that her husband was seeking sexual service outside. That caused her to doubt her sufficiency for her husband if she was not able to satisfy him. It caused her to doubt herself.

“When I [discovered]that my husband went out clubbing and even went out to those hanky panky massage parlors, I felt betrayed, hurt. Am I not doing something good enough to, not to satisfy him, mentally, physically and emotionally? Then I always, initially, I always blamed myself for insufficiency, it's like something is lacking in me” (Line 32-37/Rose).

She gave him the benefit of doubt and hoped that he would change and be faithful but it did not happen. She was hurt to find out during her confinement period with her second child, that her husband was still seeking sexual service outside.

“When I was pregnant with my first son, during my confinement, I found out that I had been betrayed sexually. In the sense that he was finding sexual services, I don’t know from a message parlor or whatever. At that time I feel hurt, I feel hurt, I asked why these things happened to me. Then OK after that I still gave him the benefit of the doubt. Hopefully, he would come back and absolutely belong to me, physically, emotionally and sexually. So when I had the second [child] [a daughter], and again during the confinement, he again sought sexual services from all these massage parlors. And I found [I was] very hurt, very hurt lah, very, very hurt. Very hurt is like very hurt” (Line 258-266/Rose).

Rose described how she felt hurt when she realized that her husband had had intimate relationships with other women besides her.

“It is very [much] mental torture. Every now and then he comes back, you realize that the T-shirt, the pants, everything is full of a perfume smell that is not him. It’s from the women, it’s from a GRO[guest relations officer-euphemism for prostitute], from a china doll, the karaoke and even the intimate part stinks with perfume. I feel hurt, I feel cold and feel hurt. You feel suddenly your heart is dropping. He had this intimate relationship with this other woman. You know that he has been doing this with other girls, intimate things. It hurt a lot” (Line 75-80/Rose).

She was even more hurt when she confronted him about his immoral sexual activities. His comment was that his life would be beautiful if Rose was to act stupid and pretend that nothing happened.

“ So when I confronted him, he says that lah if I don’t be like this, his life would be very beautiful, his life would be very beautiful. If I behaved a little more stupid and be a foolish woman, don’t know anything, pretend that nothing happened, then he says his life would be very beautiful, his life would be very beautiful, not my life. I even got [more] hurt” (Line 266-270/Rose).

The words “hurt”, “very hurt” and “hurtful” rang throughout her sharing and were mentioned at least ten times when she shared about her husband’s sexual activities with other women. However, the feeling of hurt faded as she realized that her husband did not even care about her feelings.

“Initially, you get hurt, hurt but after that you have no feeling, come to the second stage, I find that I have no feeling, it doesn’t hurt anymore. The hurt is not there anymore. When I realized even more thing, he is like telling, ‘ya I am going to all these [women/places] so what?’ You know. He doesn’t even care how you feel anymore” (Line 291-294/Rose).

She also told of many sleepless nights when she woke up to an empty bed, wondering where her husband was. I could see the sadness on her face when she recounted such an experience. The tone of voice also sounded low.

“Every now and then you wake up in the middle of the night, you saw the bed is empty, you hurt, you feel sad and you cannot do anything” (Line 86-88/Rose).

As a wife, she could not even ask her husband where he went the night before.

“And you can’t even ask him where are you going? You can’t even call and ask him where are you now? Why? If, let’s say, I am a landlord, I can ask my tenant, last night where did you go? I can’t even ask my husband” (Line 799-802/Rose).

Her plea to her husband to stay home, to stop clubbing fell on deaf ears and her husband told her that it was his lifestyle and she could either take it or leave it.

Usually we have a picture of home as a place to relax, a place where we can be free to enjoy moments of peace away from the hustle and bustle of life, but it was not so for Rose if her husband was around. Rose commented that the mood of the house changed whenever the husband came home. Not only was she living in fear but also were her children. She said it felt like living in a war zone where war may erupt at any time and the bombs might explode anytime.

“And in fact every now and then when my children knew that he was coming back, my children worried that at any time the bomb shell is there and may explode, then there will quarreling, fighting. Actually, my children live in fear, actually in fear before I walked out” (Line 161-165/Rose)

The feeling of walking on a mine field where it might just explode on her was what Rose described in the presence of her abusive husband. The sense of wickedness was so strong that she compared him with the devil.

“Whenever he comes home, the moment he comes back, he opens the gate, I feel very disturbed, my children feel very fearful. It’s like the devil is back” (Line 314-316/Rose).

Besides being unfaithful to her sexually, Rose's husband also taunted her constantly:

"Sometimes the words that he uttered were very abusive, you know. It was very disturbing, [I was] very hurt in that sense. In those days, I stayed in the house belonging to him, I don't have any name. I myself a lawyer, [looking after the upkeep of] the house that I am staying in, but I didn't have a name in that house, you know" (Line 295-298/Rose).

It was as if to degrade Rose's professionalism as she is herself a lawyer. She knew that without her name on the house title deeds, she had no rights to the house, though she may be the one maintaining it. He not only said it once but often enough that Rose's daughter, who was then only eight years old, was able to remind Rose of what her father had said about her mother not having a name on the house title deeds, after one of the explosive moments she had had with her husband.

Despite being abused and let down by the husband, Rose initially still tried to portray to the public that she had a complete family while inwardly she felt betrayed, hurt and emotionally depleted..

"I was struggling, struggling in the sense that I wanted to portray to the public, that I have a very complete, healthy, happy family, but in fact it was not so. In fact, I was walking around in depletion, with no soul. I had no soul" (Line 38-40/Rose).

She felt so empty inside but yet still has to put on a show.

She also tried to spend more time with her husband in the hope of winning him back, but it was all to no avail.

“I just dropped my children off, leave them there and then I’d just go out with him, with my ex, for breakfast. In a way, I was thinking if I spend time with him, you know, I can patch [things] up with him, just spend another two hours of personal time with him for breakfast, but it doesn’t help. It didn’t help at all” (Line 236-239/Rose).

Though the husband would still do what he used to do, bringing the family for holidays locally or overseas, Rose sensed that though he was physically present, mentally and emotionally he was not there anymore. They drifted more and more apart from each other. It was then Rose realized that it is not working.

“I started to realize that things weren’t working out anymore you know. Physically he is there but mentally, emotionally he is not with you anymore. He may bring you overseas for holidays, or for short trips for outstation holidays, you know that though this man is physically there, mentally, emotionally he is not with you anymore. As a wife you can feel it, as a wife you can feel the distance get [wider], drifting apart more and more each day” (Line 283-288/Rose).

When speaking of her husband’s indifferent attitude towards her, Rose’s facial expression was sad and she was upset that her husband would tell her off, telling point blank that basically it was his lifestyle and he was not about to change.

“And he just said, leave it or take it, my father [is] also like that ah” (Line 304/Rose)

“He says this is my lifestyle, you have to take it” (Line 310/Rose).

“He doesn’t even care how you feel anymore” (Line 294/Rose).

All the above statements caused Rose to feel left out and made her feel she did not have a sense of belonging in the house anymore. Thoughts of leaving began to take shape.

“I began to feel, I didn’t have a sense of belonging in this house. I didn’t even felt at home in this place anymore” (line 322-323/Rose).

The final straw for Rose came one late night, on 6 August 2006. Something happened that fateful night, which served as the straw that broke the camel’s back. I could see her anger and hear the emotion boiling up in her as she shared with me about it. It was unbelievable to her that her husband should beat her. Throughout the interview, she mentioned this particular incident and its date very frequently, describing it like it was happening yesterday. She described in detail what took place on that late night, she could even remember the time. It was around 2.30 am when the husband came home and she questioned his late coming. He challenged Rose to beat him if she did not like his answer and when Rose slapped his shoulder the second time, he retaliated by punching her, pulling her hair and punching her head continuously till she had to get a scratcher and hit him off.

“So I slapped him for the second time and he started to retaliate by punching me, pulling my hair and punching my head continuously. You know my size of 4 feet 11 inches and a man of 5 feet 8 inches. So he pulled my hair, my hair is long, he pulled my hair, I cannot [get him to] let go. I finally got hold of a back scratcher just on the dressing table. He pressed me down on the bed and he beat me, can you imagine, [he] kept beating me [and I] had to hit him [to get him] off, for my self-defense. Even after that he came at me [like that again]” (Line 101-107/Rose).



After she managed to push her husband off her back, she ran to her son's room for help but the son who was only 9 year old, was too stunned to do anything and just totally covered himself up under his blanket. I believe it was a traumatic experience for the son too.

“And I pushed him off, I ran to my son's bedroom and I called for help. I told him I have been beaten up by your daddy. So in the middle of the night, 2:45am my son saw me , he got stunned, he got very scared at the same time and then he just covered up himself under the blanket” (Line 109-112/Rose).

She then called 999 for help but they kept asking her where she was until the line got cut off. She finally called her own sister to tell her of her plight and informed her that she was going to police station to lodge a police report. Throughout the night, she was at the police station till early morning and she was disappointed that her husband did not turn up at all.

It came as a shock for Rose that the man who had slept beside her would beat her so badly. She vividly described the night that acted as a final straw that broke the camel's back.

“I got the shock of my life, you know, that I had been beaten up in this way. So I called my sister to inform her that I had been beaten up by him and that I was going to the police station. So I went and changed, I drove to the police station and lodged a police report and then throughout the night. you know, until the next morning, the police statement, the IO (interim order) statement and then went to the hospital for x-rays and a medical check-up, you know. He didn't appear at all. He didn't come to my assistance, you know” (Line 117-123/Rose).

Rose was one who was not afraid to let others know that she had been abused.

She informed her sister on the night that she was badly beaten up. Though she knew what to do as a legal professional, she was saddened by the fact that her husband did not turn up to assist her, nor did he show any sign of remorse for what he did. He did not show any concern for her after that.

The events that took place after the beating caused Rose to be further disheartened about the relationship. He not only beat her but also told her brother that he could easily kill Rose as he was a karate black belt; this revelation caused her to give up hope for her relationship. Her husband also never bothered to visit her at the hospital:

“All the physical bruises and that. I mean a man can beat you to such an extent, knowing that she is your wife, [and] borne two children for him. Why is that he can beat you? So [since then] I didn’t treat him as a husband” (Line 134-137/Rose).

She gave up hope and was really disappointed with the husband’s behavior.

Actually according to her, way before the physical beating, after many attempts to get the husband to be more family oriented had failed, she actually had thought of leaving. The physical beating only made it finality.

To Rose, that was the worst day in her life and it was also the day that she took her children and left the marital home.

“I married him in 1995, and then things happened. The physical [beating] happened in 2006, [the marriage had] lasted eleven years. It is the worst day, that’s also the day I separated with him” (line 242-243/Rose).

But before the actual leaving, she had started her preparations to leave.

Rose had not only prepared herself but also her children for the imminent departure. She and the children had gone house hunting together.

“I began to feel I don’t have a sense of belonging in this house. I didn’t even felt at home in this place anymore. See or not? So I tell my two children, let’s go hunting for a house that really belongs to us, a place we can call home and come back in peace without him. So we drove the car, hunting for houses, in Canning Garden, looking for house this and that. Then I warned my children. I myself was prepared and I wanted my children to prepare. We will be moving out one fine day” (Line 322-328/Rose).

She wanted a place she and children could call home and find peace in the home. She wanted let her children to know well ahead of time that one day they would be moving out of the marital home without their father. So she bought a house in February and moved into the new house in August after the battering incident.

“So finally I got a house here. During that time before things happened. In February I bought this house and things happened in August. Because prior to that we were encountering so many [issues], so many things happened that I gave up” (Line 337-339/Rose).

Emotionally, she had prepared herself by withdrawing from him sexually:

“First, I withdraw from my sexual relationship with him. When a woman withdraws from the sexual relationship with the spouse, actually, I would say you are eighty percent prepared for divorce already” (Line 715-717/Rose).

Maybe due to her profession as legal professional, she not only filed a police report about the abuse, she also pressed charges against her husband for physically violating her:

“I tell the police, not only is it domestic violence, in the eyes of criminal law, it is a physical assault. If I beat you the same punishment should be the same [as in criminal law]. So I wanted him to be charged, it’s no longer just a family affair. So I went through all these [issues] and I make sure he was properly charged in court” (Line 476-479/Rose).

She even got the media to publicize her case as a strategy to get at her ex-husband for abusing her and also with the hope of educating men about the consequences of abusing their wives:

“You have to have strategies to play the game with them. So as for this ex of mine, I knew he was from a rich family. The only thing to make them “*kao tau*” (bow down) is publicity. So I found that going for the publicity, the newspaper, brought out the message loud and clear. Ipoh is very small, everybody knows them. I found this is very good weapon to put them down and suppress them. See or not. At the same time, not only as a weapon towards them, it also brought out the message to all the men, don’t ever touch your wife, your wife is only to be loved, not to be kept as a dog, or as a punching bag. Is like ah, you have one stone and you kill two birds. It rang out the message loud [and clear] to all men: don’t lay your hands on your wife and at the same time, I tell the wife don’t just keep silent, walk out! At the same time also, the publicity was a weapon against them. Yes, you have money, you have reputation, now your reputation is at stake” (Line 515-526/Rose).

Since her husband’s family was rich and they were afraid of negative publicity from the husband’s abuse case, she purposely involved the media in it. She knew that by involving the media, she could gain an upper hand. She hoped that through the publicity, she could not only get at her abusive husband but also send

out a message to society that abusing one's wife is a criminal offence. She wanted all men to know that a wife is to be loved and not serve as a punching bag. She was quite angry that her husband should be physically violent towards her.

When asked what helped and gave her strength to leave, she said she believed God has a purpose for her in allowing her to go through all this.

“When you are a Christian, you have God, no matter what. God does not only bring blessing with the good things, but you have to go through trials and tribulations to build up our faith, to strengthen our faith. Then sometimes, I know I have a purpose you know” (Line 141-143/Rose).

She not only has a firm belief that the trials and tribulations that she goes through can strengthen her faith, but that her experiences can also serve to educate and help other women in similar situations.

“I myself as a lawyer, as a professional, let's say I encounter this, I believe there are many other women who just hide themselves in the darkness, just keep quiet. So I also hope that through my own experience, through my walking out, I [can] bring a message to people. When you are subject to all these kinds of physical abuses or mental abuse, you know, call for legal assistance, get proper legal advice” (Line 144-148/Rose).

As a lawyer, it helped when she faced these situations that she knew what her rights and entitlements were and she understood the legal process to get what is due to her and her children. She repeated the phrase “I know my rights” a few times when talking about divorce; and, she was able to invoke the law to get her husband to pay for maintenance.

“As of right, the law, this particular law provides for the maintenance of married women, the maintenance of married women and children. This particular law states that the husband must maintain the children. So I invoked this particular law, claimed for my children, [including] payment for a domestic helper” (Line 186-189/Rose).

The issues of child custody also were in her mind and she knew that if she wanted to secure custody of the children after the divorce, she needed further evidence to prove that her husband was not fit to take care of the children. She was worried that if her husband were to gain custody of the children, he would not know how to take care of them and he would impart wrong moral values to them.

“So I get more evidence on him, of his immoral sexual activities, of his, the sinful lifestyle so that, you know, I don’t want my children to fall into the hand of their father, you know. If he cannot take care of himself, he cannot take care of the children. If a man cannot have a proper moral and upright lifestyle, he can’t impart any moral skills to the children” (Line 195-199/Rose).

Looking back, she is thankful to God for sustaining her and for her church friends who prayed for her as she went through the process of leaving the abusive relationship and the ordeal of the court trial. She is all smiles when she talks about how God is her pillar of support. I could see her excitement whenever she talked about her God.

“When these things happened, who was my pillar of support? God. I prayed hard, I meditated on the word of God, the Bible, the book of Psalms, on justice and God told me I am the avenger, you just keep quiet and behave. I will be the avenger, vengeance comes from Me. So actually I don’t have to do anything because I know God is watching everything.... God is invisible and yet I can depend on God as a pillar of support ...very supportive” (Line 772-778/ Rose).

Besides God as her pillar of support, she found comfort in the Bible. She believes God is watching over all. Rose found also that her church members were very empathetic about her circumstances. They did not condemn her decision to divorce. The church members were supporting her through the ordeal via prayer.

“I would say, you know, my church members, every Sunday they prayed for me. My secret is no secret, you know. I go to church I tell everybody, I need your prayer . . . I didn’t keep it a secret so I told everybody I have this problem, I am going through this [court] case. And every time I have a court hearing, I ask them to please pray for me. Please announce it and pray for me” (Line 808-813/ Rose).

Rose is open about her situation and boldly sought support from her church members. They were supportive and prayed for her weekly. Rose was glad that not only were friends in church supportive of her decision, but also many of her other friends affirmed her decision to walk out. She was thankful that God sent her friends to affirm her of her decision to leave.

“Finally when I walked out, I thanked God. God sent me all these friends, all good friends. I have so many, assuring me saying you are fighting, I know you are doing the right thing. Everybody is telling me you are doing the right thing and everybody is saying that you are very strong” (Line 352-355/Rose).

All these reassuring words from friends gave her confidence that she was doing the right thing. And her inner voice was also telling her that walking out of the abusive relationship was the right thing to do.

“The strength in me tells me I am doing something right. And I am walking out to reach for something good which is waiting for me right in front. So of course I have also to go through all this - go through the court cases, police, this and that” (Line 357-359/ Rose).

Though she still had to go through the ordeal of all the necessary procedures in pressing charges against her husband such as attending to police inquiries and court cases, Rose left the relationship in anticipation of something good ahead of her.

Rose was all smiles when talking about her life after leaving. She was so relieved after leaving the man who did not deserve her.

“Relief, relief and I was no longer with someone not deserving me. I found that I deserved something more. I deserved ... I think with all these things that I had done, after all, this man didn’t deserve me” (Line 594-596/Rose).

Rose found peace and joy after walking out of the abusive relationship, not only for herself but also for her children. There is no more fear and no more violence at home. Home was finally a place one wanted to go back to.

“When I say joy, joy is the inside out thing, you know. Joy, no more being fearful of him, no more violence, no more quarrelling, no more all this nonsense at home. Home is where you feel like coming home to and don’t feel like going out. So when I walked out, when I shifted to this place, my son said Mum I’ve really found peace now. It was very good to hear from the children that Mum I’ve really found peace now. They know that we are away from him, no more fighting and we could really lead the life that we wanted all this while. So I found that I had walked out a victor. I really found joy, I found joy, I no longer had to answer to the public, you know” (Line 530-538/Rose).

Rose felt relief that she no longer had to hide behind the façade; she no longer had to find excuses on behalf of her husband.

“When you are not divorced, you were still in the darkness. When people ask you where your husband is, nobody knows that you actually mentally, you have separated from this man because



legally you are still his wife. So they ask you where he is, so you still have to find answer for him. “O ya, he is busy”, while in fact he is not, he is now in the pub with other woman” (Line 539-543/Rose).

Her friends commented that she seemed much happier when she had obtained her divorce papers than when she was married:

“Very much better in the sense that you know, when I got my divorce in the court, on the particular day in September 2009 when the court announced that the divorce had been granted, I really, I really overflowed with happiness. I went and hugged everybody, hugged all my lawyer friends in the court (laughing). And then my lawyer friend says xx I think you are happier than when you get married (laugh). I attended your wedding, now that you’ve got your divorce, you are even more happy. I said ... definitely yes!” (Line 586-592/Rose)

She was glad to be single again! She said it was better to be single than married with an unhappy and tormented life in marriage. She considered her husband the black spot in her life. After she threw out the bad spot, she realized that she actually had a good life. Everything in life was good for her. I could see the contentment in her eyes when she shared about God’s goodness in her life. She described her husband as trash, the only black spot that had ruined her life.

“I have all these good things in my life. Actually I have a good brother and sisters, I have everything good in my life, my business, my [business] partner and all the good things in my life except him only. So I find he is a ruin, a black spot in my life, you see or not. So if I keep this black spot in my life, it spoilt my whole life. After I throw out this trash, I find that actually I own all these good things in life. I have many friends, I have everything good in my life except him, I would say” (Line 630-635/Rose).

By throwing him out, Rose found peace and joy, not only for herself but also her children. She was thankful that people around her did not condemn her for

walking out of the abusive relationship, but instead they affirmed her for doing the right thing.

“Everybody is telling me you are doing the right thing” (Line 354/Rose).

Rose also discovered that no matter whom she shared her problem with, ultimately, she herself had to make the decision as to what she wanted in life. She had to finally decide that she needed to walk out.

“I find that no matter who you share [with], they can only share your thoughts. You have to decide for yourself what you want in your life” (Line 347-348/Rose).

However, she acknowledged that sharing about her situation with others did provide temporary relief, but the anguish would come back when she was at home or when she tried to sleep.

“When you share with them, you feel relief but the torment still came back to you when [tried to] sleep, when you [were] walking around your home” (Line 349-350/Rose).

In order to be sure that she got the custody of the children, she went to the extent of taking on the role of being a private investigator herself so as to gather evidence for the court to prove that her husband was not fit to take care of the children.

“I needed evidence to prove that he is not a good father, you know. He is not ready to take care of the children, so I wanted to make sure that the children are all the time with me. So I got more evidence of him, of his immoral sexual activities, of his ... sinful lifestyle” (Line 193-196/Rose).

She described how people would inform her of her husband's whereabouts, how she gathered circumstantial evidence of her husband messing around with other women. The most conclusive evidence came from an outstation trip that her husband took with a 'China doll' [prostitute]. She got to know about their trip through a source and she checked in at the same hotel one day earlier. She managed to catch a photo of her husband while he was checking in at the hotel with the 'China doll'.

"I snatched a photo of him checking in at the hotel with the girl. So what? It's nothing still that intimate to conclude that he had an affair with her. Of course [that] he checked at in the hotel with the China doll is very good already, is 50 percent . So I say: God, I need something more" (Line 418-421/Rose).

Though she got the photo, she wanted to have more concrete evidence. She was very frustrated and the friend who was with her during that time advised her to make a police report. Coincidentally there was a police patrol car just outside the restaurant where she had her dinner that night. She went to ask the police what she could do and the policeman asked her to follow him to the police station to lodge an official report.

"So I tell the police, I caught my husband with a China doll, checking into a hotel, what am I supposed to do now? I want you all go and arrest him and the China doll. So the police say, come, "*ikut saya balik* (follow me back to) police station", make a police report" (Line 431-433/Rose)

As the woman that her husband was with was a foreigner, the police could go and check if the woman has a valid visa to remain in Malaysia. That is how she got into her husband's hotel room in the middle of the night together with the police.

“So in the middle of night, about 1 o’clock, he came back with the China doll, maybe from the shopping or what. I saw his car was there already, so I called the police, you can come now. That’s how we got into the room and he was with the China doll in the room” (Line 437-440/Rose).

As the police raided the hotel room, the husband and the China lady were taken to the police station to make a police report. That report, though she did not catch them in bed, was sufficient evidence for her to win custody of the children.

“The report was very conclusive, very strong evidence. Because the report said who is in the room, my husband the IC [Identity Card] number and the residential address and the China doll Zhou Yin, her passport number, with a valid visa. This was very good for me already. I [had] caught him, even though they were not making love, this was very good already. One man and [one] woman in the room, what can they do in the room. See or not. The report... with the report I won the custody case for my two children” (Line 445-450/Rose).

Though the whole process was long and tiring, she was thankful to God for seeing her through. When looking back on the whole episode of being a private investigator, there were tears in her eyes when she described the frustrations that she experienced and the joy when she managed to get the evidence she needed to win custody of her children.

## Jasmine

Jasmine met her husband when she was only seventeen. She had only recently left school, having just completed her SPM. She was helping her mother sell “*otak-otak*” (fish paste) at the roadside where he was a regular customer. He was ten years older than her and often frequented the store just to woo her. Being a ‘freshie’, she soon fell for him and before knowing it, she found herself pregnant. Being Malay, her parents saw no way out but for her to marry the man. Marry she did and Jasmine spent five years in a futile effort to please a man who would not be pleased. Looking back, she saw her own ignorance due to a lack of sex education in the early years and she said the only reason she was married at such a young age was because of the pregnancy.

“And as I told you, I, we didn’t have sex education at home, erm... at school...Erm...And you are Muslim, erm... and you don’t know what to do. I got pregnant and my parents forced me to get married. We got married for that” (Line 32-35/ Jasmine).

The confidence peeled away, revealing a seventeen-year-old who had made several bad choices. Jasmine’s first bad choice was to become intimate with this man. Her second was to marry the baby’s father. Jasmine married her husband in 1997. She was Ten years his junior, she was too young she confesses, to know the difference between being in love and being horny. At first she was embarrassed to tell me that she was pregnant before marriage, but when asked how the marriage came about at such young age, she was honest and told me the truth. She attributed her early marriage to the naïvety of youth. She lamented that she wasted her opportunity to study at university due to her ignorance as she had

gotten very good results for her SPM. Instead of entering university she entered into marriage. She says:

“When I was 17, I have a good SPM results and because I met him, because of the pregnancy, I don’t blame my parents also.....if I had an education, [had] I gone to university ... I could be somebody. And it [pregnancy and marriage] happened, nothing to regret ... just experience it” (L129-134/Jasmine).

Though she does not blame her parents for forcing her into marriage because of the pregnancy, there was a tint of sadness in her voice as she talked about the missed opportunity of studying at university and the potential she could have had, given the chance.

Although the circumstances of their marriage were slightly embarrassing, Jasmine was delighted to be a wife and expectant mother. After a year into their marriage, when they moved to stay in a rented house instead of with her parents, her joy was shattered. He began to show his true colors, his temper flared and his controlling muscles flexed. She had to depend on public transport to take her to her workplace and it would take her two to three hours to travel each way. The husband did not seem to comprehend why it took her so long to travel from work to home. He was always suspicious and even accused her of having someone outside whenever she came home late from work.

“Every time from my [place], we rented a house, it’s in Tangga Batu. It’s an estate, like 30 minutes to 45 minutes travel because it stops, stop by [stop] and when you wait[for] the bus from the Hotel Equatorial in the town, you go from the bus station to your house at least 2 - 3 hours spent [on the journey]. And he doesn’t understand that. He doesn’t understand that. He started to say I have another guy outside and that’s where it started” (Line 47-52/Jasmine)

Jasmine's husband was very jealous and did everything he could to prevent her from having contact with other men. She was not allowed to attend any social activities and could not even join him when he was playing a badminton game with his friend. He would accuse her of wanting to hang around with guys.

“All the guys are there, how, why you want to hang in [there] to see all the guys?” (Line 223/Jasmine).

She is only allowed out to work and not to any other social activities. She is not permitted to meet her old friends. She is not allowed to join in the sports competitions that her company was organizing. Jasmine always had to be home when the husband was home. She felt that she lost her freedom after marriage.

“No freedom at all, he just [wants] me to stay at home, do nothing also never mind, as long you are at home when he gets home” (Line 256-257/Jasmine).

Work provided her only avenue for social interaction.

“I didn't have [a] social life after I got married, I can't meet my old friends even though it was as a group - girls, guys over coffee. I don't have that freedom” (Line 252-254/Jasmine).

Being a girl who loved sports, she was thoroughly frustrated by the restrictions on her participation in sporting activities.

“Even though there was a bowling tournament from my hotel, for me to play, still no. Badminton tournament - I was a sports girl before and I loved sport - just no. I was so frustrated” (Line 259-261/Jasmine).

For Jasmine, life during that time was confined to only home and work.

The husband limited her social activities.

As if restricting her social activities was not enough, her husband also made sure that she had to get his permission before she could do anything in the house. He is the one who decides if she cooks, what to cook and when to cook. He would not hesitate to slap her on the face if what she did in the house did not meet with his satisfaction. She described one dramatic incident which was unforgettable - all because what she cooked was not up to her husband's standard. The husband threw the food she had cooked onto the floor, slapped her, locked her in a room for two hours, switched off the mains while leaving the baby crying outside the room. It broke Jasmine's heart to hear her son crying outside the room while she was locked inside the dark room. She felt helpless and angry with her husband's behavior. The husband did let her out of the room after two hours but he left the house in darkness and went to work. All this punishment was just because the food that she had cooked was deemed unacceptable by her then husband.

"I cooked simple things when he asked me to cook, there's nothing in the fridge and it's fried rice and fried egg and some sardines ... One night, he just got mad and threw everything onto the wall. from the table just threw [it] like that. Made a mess around the house, made my son cry nonstop. I think it's a little bit crazy or what, he pulled the main switch off our house so that we will be in the dark the whole night... And he went to work for the night - overnight shift. That, that's one incident that I won't, forget. And why he did that to me? I didn't deserve that, just because the food is not good? What you want me to do? There is nothing in the fridge, you ask me to cook and the shop from our house is too far away, we have no car, no motorbike, no bicycle at all, how [do] you want [me] to do something? Right? So, he just gets mad. He just wants things to be for him. He just ... it's [all] about him, it's [always] the same" (Line 69-80/Jasmine).



In retrospect, she felt that his actions were unwarranted and that she did not deserve the unkind treatment given her by her husband. She was frustrated that everything had to be centered around his every whim and fancy. It was all about him!

For example, Jasmine recalled the degrading names such as prostitute and whore that her husband used to fling at her. They still stick in her mind until today.

“All the bad words. All ... you know ‘*jalang, sundal*’ (whore, prostitute). This word, yes. That’s also one ... one of the abuses in my life [they are] still in my mind all these words. And I ... I have been ... I don’t want to think about it. He used these [words] even though, you know ... because he married [me] after I got pregnant, he called my son *anak haram* (bastard). Very hurt you know. He’s your son, you know. I was only 17, I knew nothing, what is wrong with you? You say my son is *anak haram* (bastard). And I’m the *sundal* (prostitute), which means I’m just somebody by the roadside” (Line 454-460/Jasmine).

Not only did he call her that at home, but over the phone as well. She felt she was just a sex object to him and also was just there to do the household chores, instead of being loved and treated as a wife:

“Even when we get mad on the phone, ‘hey! *sundal, mana kau?*’ (prostitute, where are you)? Eh, come on. Eh... even though on the phone, you are ... you call me that? It’s like I am just there for sex. You know, a lot of them, Malay women [are] there for the husband just for sex. For them to have nice life, easy life - no laundry, no cooking, no washing. And be forced to do sex too ... even when you refuse they force you. I’m not animal. I’m not that” (Line 467-472/Jasmine).

Jasmine stops for a long minute, hesitating, unsure how much she is willing to reveal. Finally, she takes a deep breath and continues. There was one significant part of her marriage, where she felt like she was just a sex doll. I could see that it was not easy for Jasmine to discuss these intimate and embarrassing details. Her face was pinched tight, her words come out in a little burst. Her husband wants sex whenever he wants it. It simply was not an option for her to refuse, even if she was tired. Even if she had headache or been up all night with a sick child. Though sexual intimacy between couples is an expression of love and is one of the most wonderful ways to express love between couples, but for Jasmine, she felt that she was being raped rather than being loved by her husband. She had no freedom to say ‘no’ to him as refusal would lead to physical abuse.

“.....And I feel like I was being raped instead having, making love. And every time if I say no, the more that I say no, he started to get mad, throw things. So, every time you’re just like a doll, just, just being there” (Line 548-550/Jasmine).

It seems like sex was part of Jasmine’s husband’s campaign to ensure that Jasmine would devote every minute of her existence, every ounce of her energy, to meeting his needs. Truly there was no significant difference between his demands for sex and the kind of dinner Jasmine is to cook. Jasmine’s life was centered on the impossible feat of getting it right. And her husband was the one who defined right and wrong. So much energy was spent on trying to keep her husband happy.

Jasmine's voice took on an angry edge when she remembers how the husband's step-father also tried to harass her sexually by unwanted touching. He took advantage of her when he drove her home on the motor bike.

“His step-father tried to take advantage of me sometimes. You know, tried to touch me here ... and because ah... when I come back at 11pm, I will pick up my son. So, from my in-law's house, to go to my house, he would bring me by motor bike. When he took me [by] motorbike, you know, he [would] try to touch me” (Line 239-242/Jasmine).

Over time, Jasmine learned to anticipate her husband's needs. She saw to it that he always got everything he wanted, even before he had to ask for it. She knew that if he got mad, she would be beaten, but there was no way she could anticipate when he would get mad. She tried anyway.

“When you are at home, you feel like you don't want to make him mad. You make sure that everything is perfect” (Line 272-273/Jasmine).

Jasmine recalled those times, instead of wanting to go home after each day of work, she preferred to stay away from home as much as possible. She avoided going home and each time she was offered overtime she grabbed the opportunity to do so. She tried to do as many hours of overtime as she possibly could. Her husband even became suspicious of her working so many hours of overtime. Her husband did not trust her, he checked on her when she told him she had to work extra hours.

He would actually call the hotel to verify if what she said was true.

“So, it’s I didn’t want to go back home. Every time after [I] finished work, if I can, I stay. [If] there is a hotel transport to send me back [home], I will stay, I don’t mind to call him and say[if] you don’t believe me you can call the hotel, [I] am working extra hours. So, every time it’s like I’m like being watched., If I say I [am working] extra hours, he will call the hotel, ya, ya, she is working extra and people will look [at] me. What’s the deal? Why doesn’t your husband trust you?” (Line 245-249/Jasmine).

Her husband’s actions caused her much embarrassment at the workplace. She became a topic of conversation at work. They often wondered why her husband had to call to verify if she was actually working overtime as she claimed she was. She never ever told her colleagues about her husband’s abuse. Jasmine learned to keep things in her heart and she concealed the bruises on her face by putting on extra makeup to cover up things. And knowing that crying was not going to help, she devised a plan to get her husband to agree with her in moving back to her parents’ home. She began to plan her leaving by exposing her husband’s violent behavior to her parents by persuading her husband to move in with her parents. Being a persuasive lady, she knew how to convince him - by suggesting they save on rent to buy a car. She somehow managed to persuade him to agree with her plan:

“I try to stop crying, try to psycho him and told him instead of paying 300 [ringgit] for the rent we can save the money and buy a car. Easier for me, I could come back early, you could pick me up, you could bring the son ... go, easy, you won’t have to wait for the bus and waste time. Why don’t we move back to my mum’s house? (Line 107-111/Jasmine)

With this move, Jasmine hoped that by exposing his abusive behavior, her parents would come to know of her plight and maybe render a helping hand. At the same time it would serve as a deterrent for her husband to continue laying a hand on her.

“The idea was [I] just want my parents ... to let my parents see what [was] happening to me. So, we talk, talk, talk and he says okay. We move to my mum’s house. The idea also [was] to tell that he needs to change if he still wants to be with me. And when we moved back to my mum’s, he was still the same and my mum and my dad can’t stand it. And, I talked to my mum ... that’s the reason why I came back” (Line 113-115/Jasmine).

Jasmine was clever in subtly getting her parents involved. She did not tell her parents about the abuse directly, but managed to persuade the husband to move in to stay with her parents on the pretext of saving money to buy a car of their own. Only after the parents had seen what the husband was doing to her could she tell her mother the real reason for her moving back.

Though the husband did not change much while living with her parents, he was mindful that there were people watching him and hearing what went on between them in their room. He felt uncomfortable and wanted to move out again. This time, Jasmine cleverly reminded him of their mission to save money in order to buy a car.

“Now people know what you did. And people keep watching you. And I don’t say what is inside of me. I say no, we must buy a car ... just [remind him of] our mission to be here” (Line 155-157/Jasmine).

For once, she felt she was winning and was in charge.

“Inside of me I win, I say I don’t want to move” (Line 153/Jasmine).

Though she did not verbalize her thoughts to her husband, she knew that she was doing the right thing in not moving out from her parents' home again. Each small victory gave her strength to eventually ask him to move out of her parents' home.

Jasmine worked as the head of a restaurant in a hotel and she felt a sense of accomplishment. She got to meet people from different walks of life and from different parts of the world. With the kind of exposure she had at work, she saw people free to do what they want in life. She began to question the kind of life she had, being controlled and having to follow all that her husband wanted.

“As a Malay or Muslim you must follow what a man says. ... I don't accept that. So, I was married like 3 years, about 3 years and we start to ... I ... I start to see things when I work in a hotel. I mix with people. I see [a] different life. I see people ... I saw people travel. They do things ... what they want and I can't do what I want” (Line 19-23/Jasmine).

This realization only set in after three years of working in the hotel. Then she began to ask why other people can do the things they liked but not her. She wanted respect and happiness in life and not to be treated as a puppet or sex doll:

“I just don't want to be a doll. I don't want to be a puppet. I want to be somebody. I want to have freedom. I want to have my own life. I want people to respect me, you know. I don't ask [for] all the luxuries in life, the big house or whatever it is. I just want happiness in my life” (Line 552-555/Jasmine).

All Jasmine wanted was to be able to take control of her own life. She knew in her heart that she did not want to be a doll, she desired to be treated with respect and she wanted to have a life of her own, not one that was controlled by others. These thoughts began to grow in her mind after three years of marriage and one day it began to take root.

Her job was the place where Jasmine was treated with respect. How shameful it was when her husband blasted her superior for calling her at home to check an outstanding bill. This incident caused Jasmine to finally “throw” her husband out.

“I work in a hotel, so I ... I have a ‘captain’ position in [the] restaurant. I went back home and a supervisor called me, a guy. He called me because there was one bill hanging. [He] just wanted to ask [about] that, and he [my husband] got mad [He] drove ... drove down to the hotel and met these people with [the] guy in the restaurant, you know. It was very embarrassing. And [my husband] shouted at him. And but [he] was good enough ... this guy was smart. Ah... he said, I called your wife because your wife is in charge of the restaurant and there is no supervisor. This bill was hanging ... I wanted to ask whose bill this is. There was no customer there. Is it wrong? You see, I know it’s 12 o’clock midnight but she finishes work at 11.30pm. So she is not sleeping yet, she maybe has just reached home. Is it wrong? And from that day ... the next day I went to work, everybody talked about me, you know, very embarrassing and I have had enough of you [the husband]. Please move out of my mum’s house, just go away from my mum’s house” (Line 159-170/Jasmine).

Jasmine became the talk in the hotel that day and that was the final straw that made her snap. She finally asked him to move out of her mother’s house. As her parents had been witnessing the kind of life she has had with her husband, they did not stop her from chasing him out of the house.

Initially, her husband was unwilling to move out. He apologized for his actions and was sorrowful for what he had done. He was well behaved after the incident when he confronted her superior, but Jasmine was determined to end the relationship. She gave him the cold shoulder and stopped doing all her wifely duties of cooking and doing laundry for him. Because they were staying in her

parents' home and her parents knew about his abusive nature, they did not interfere with her action. Her husband could not do anything. He eventually did move out of her parents' home, seeing that Jasmine had given up on the relationship.

“He started to be good, he started to be ‘I’m sorry’ and everything, so good to me, [for] two weeks. After that, I just said, I’ve had enough. It’s like we stay together, but... well, I just go with my brother, do things with my mum, go out, just leave him behind. I don’t care about the lunch, the dinner, your clothes, you do it yourself. No more. And he can’t do anything. He is in my mum’s house. In the end he moved out” (Line 172-177/Jasmine).

She recognized how strong she was - how strong, in fact, she had always been. She remained steadfast to her decision that her husband must leave her mother’s house. Jasmine calmly and quietly told him to leave. She wanted him out of her life. This time round, she was not moved by his apologies.

After the husband left, she tried to apply for a divorce by herself, but was met with lots of difficulties.

“I swear in my heart. It’s like they put you down. Why [did] your husband leave you? You don’t know how to look after him?” (Line 301-302/Jasmine).

She was disappointed with the degrading statement that was made to her and she gave up applying for the divorce herself. And she felt like a ball, being kicked around from one department to another just to get the necessary form to file for a divorce.



“The court[is] upstairs, so, all the paper work you do is downstairs,[at the] Pejabat Jabatan Agama Islam [Islamic Religious Affairs Department], in town. So, it’s like a ball, this one say go there, I mean I went there, they say no, there, just for asking for one form to fill in” (Line 489-491/Jasmine).

Her voice revealed anger when she mentioned about her court experience, when the judge asked her about her sex life with her husband, instead of dealing with the divorce. She felt like she was being harassed by the judge asking her when was the last time she had sex with her husband and why was he leaving if she was having sex with him, as if insulting her.

“I went to the court once. And when they asked me questions like, ah... when was the last time [you] had sex with my husband. What did we do in the ... why, why, why is he not happy, even though you were having sex with him” (Line 503-505/Jasmine)

Eventually she got so fed up and she saved up for three years and engaged a lawyer to help finalize her divorce. She finally got her divorce papers in 2007.

“So, I waited for three years, ah... three years after that, I saved my money, I hired a lawyer. It’s like ... I spend like 4k [4,000 ringgit] to [pay] the lawyer. Just like that ... [in] 3 weeks. In the court, you know, I didn’t have to say anything. The lawyer answered everything, just like that. It’s like when you have money, you get it easy. When you have nothing, you just go and see these people and they will put you really, really down” (Line 313-317/Jasmine).

She was angry with the personnel who had put her down and was glad that the lawyer was there to answer all the questions and help her to get the divorce papers in just three weeks.

“I just want to divorce, you do not need to tell me I am a bad person, that I don’t know how to look after my husband” (Line 320/Jasmine).

Jasmine was appreciative of her parents' supportiveness. They did not condemn her for seeking a divorce nor pressure her into patching things up with her husband. Instead, they silently consented to her move, as they were aware of the suffering she had gone through in the marriage. Now that she is single again, her mother has actually helped her to take care of her son, freeing her to work. And her father takes him to school together with her two other brothers who are about the same age as her son.

“My family is a very good support. Now, like my son ah ... he lives with my mum because I have two more brothers who are around the same age 14 and 15. The three of them are good friends. So, my dad takes them to school, all together. And my mum didn't even ask, I mean she said come on, I will look after your son, you just work” (Line 347-350/Jasmine)

And her older brother also supported her financially, when she was in need. She is thankful for her family's support.

“So, it is like every time I need help ... I have an older brother working in a shipping company. You know, even though I'm working in a bank, he still gave me money monthly because he knew I ... I work, er... what I earn is like one% of what he earns. He has no problems. So finance is from my family” (Line 259-262/Jasmine).

What helped Jasmine to leave was her confidence in looking after herself and her child as she was gainfully employed and also had family support. Moreover, she was able to compare her life when living with her husband in the rented house and when living with her mother. It seemed like hell and heaven in comparison. At her parents' house, she was at least free to socialize with her siblings and join her mother when she went out visiting. Her husband's domination was only in

their room. She could easily escape that by leaving the room and play around with her brothers. The husband could no longer complain about her cooking as it was her mother who did the cooking. She felt so free. She was so much happier when they were living with her parents and she knew that she would be even happier without her abusive husband around.

“I say I can look after myself and my kid. I think because I’m working. I ... I think because, I feel happy when I moved to my mum’s house, more happy than at my rental house. So, I feel like I would be more happy, if he was not around” (Line 379-381/Jasmine).

All these realizations were like pieces of a puzzle coming together and Jasmine eventually was ready to stand up for what she wanted in life. She does not want to be in the marriage anymore, to be controlled by someone else. She wanted a life of her own.

“I didn’t want to be there anymore. I just, I didn’t want to be a doll. I didn’t want to be a puppet. I wanted to be somebody. I wanted to have freedom. I wanted to have my own life. I wanted people to respect me” (Line 551-553/Jasmine).

There was nothing Jasmine needed from her husband.

“There was nothing inside of me to say I must stay because I need him. I can’t live without him. For me, I have a job. I can look after my son. I have a very ah ... supportive family” (Line 557-559/Jasmine).

Moreover, her work in the hotel gave Jasmine exposure to other people’s lives - people from different walks of life and from different parts of the world. She became more open minded and had a greater awareness of life’s possibilities.

All she wanted was to be able to take control of her own life, to not be treated like a slave or sex object, to be treated with respect.

Once her husband had left, Jasmine felt that her life had really started. She began making new friends which she was not allowed to do when married. She had no friends then. Now she can socialize freely.

“I have a lot of friends. They naturally support and advise [me]. I met[these] friends after everything [that has] happened. I have friends now just to entertain me, for chatting, socializing ... like that. Before no! There was no socializing, there were no friends” (Line 366-368/Jasmine).

Jasmine wanted a happy life and not to be abused. She often prayed to God for guidance in her years of marriage.

“I just close my eye and say God if you still love me just show me the right way, where to go, I just want to be happy. That, that’s what I always did” (Line 386-387/Jasmine).

Of course she faced some rejection from the people in her village, but she managed to brush that off. She does not go back to her home town much as the people look down on her for being a divorcee.

“If I come back to me home town, my kampong, you [are treated] like a small person because you are a divorcee, because you are a *janda*. So, I ... I don’t want to be there” (Line 671-672/Jasmine).

She is now free to do what she wants. She is contented with her own life after leaving the abusive marriage behind her.

“I do what I want - travel. I meet people, I don’t care about what people say. Ah... I have a freedom until ... I am happy, I’d say in my life. I have what I want and I have enough” (Line 709-710/Jasmine).

She is proud of herself, being able to stand on her own two feet:

“I feel that I stand by my [own] legs. I stand, I’m proud as a woman. I’m proud – that doesn’t mean that I can’t live without a man, but I ... I can live without the man that [was] unwanted in my life” (Line 713-715/Jasmine).

Jasmine says life is so much better without an abusive husband. She is now free to make her own decisions and to travel. Most importantly, she is happy that she made the decision to leave the abusive relationship and to throw the unwanted man out of her life.

### **Hibiscus**

Hibiscus looks just like any successful, capable and confident executive that you will meet in the corporate world. She had just finished meeting a client with her boss when I met her at her office. It was after a day of meetings with clients outside the office with her boss. We had some tea before she led me to her office conference room where the interviews took place. When she began to speak, the professional poise and confidence slipped away, revealing a broken woman who was once abused. Though her twelve years of abusive marriage had ended three years ago, she could not revisit the facts without reliving the emotions. She reached for tissue after tissue as she walked me through the beatings, the cruel words that cut through her soul and the threats that she had faced in her marriage.

Hibiscus's ex-husband is a professional, trading in commodity futures. Initially, their marriage was alright, but it went downhill when he began to take loans from her mother and was unable to make repayments. The development of the abuse began with the cold treatment and later developed into physical, psychological and verbal abuse. She recalls the very first time he laid his hand on her. It was on New Year's day of 1996. She had just come back from a time of celebration with her family to usher in the New Year.

"So the first time when he laid his hand on me was on New Year's eve, New Year's day. I had taken my son to my mother's place because there was some kind of gathering there. And we ushered in the New Year and all that" (Line 43-45/Hibiscus).

She was in a merry mood upon her return home with her son. She was not expecting the storm awaiting her. It was well past midnight when she got home. She was met by her angry husband demanding to know why she was home so late.

"So when I came back to the apartment. Ar ... he came out from the room, "why you come back so late" then I can't recall what exactly took place, what I said, you know whatever, whatever it was, somehow he gave,..eh, a very hard shell, gave me a very hard shell" (Line 49-52/Hibiscus).

The next thing she knew was she was on the floor. Fortunately, she did not break any bones but her knee was badly bruised.

"Arr..... and I fell on to the floor and I bruised my knee very badly. I was fortunate, I was glad that my son was not injured in anyway. And I definitely got a shiner on my knee cap to show for it" (Line 53-55/Hibiscus).

The bruises did not escape her mother's eyes. She asked Hibiscus what happened and Hibiscus told her of the New Year eve/day happening. The mother did not say anything and kept the issue in her heart.

“When my mum saw my knee cap, she asked what happened to you? I told her what happened” (Line 57-58/Hibiscus).

Hibiscus tearfully recalled another incident when she was trying to cool her husband down and stop him battering their son during dinner time; instead she was the one who was slapped for interfering with his disciplining of their son.

“It was dinner time. he was battering the boy, why [did] you let these things happen to you, what did you do, da, da, da, da....so I can't eat my dinner in peace, you know. And the boy was very quiet so I said to my husband, leave it be first, after dinner lah. He screamed, you don't *campur tangan* (interfere) when I teach the boy, you don't interfere. So then I just said but it's dinner, let us eat first. He stood up and slapped me across the face, you know” (Line 72-77/Hibiscus).

Hibiscus was shocked and told her husband to never hit her or she would go to the police. In fact, she did report the incident to the police upon her uncle's (who is a lawyer) advice.

“I sought advice from my uncle who is a lawyer and he knows my family history. It's best that you lodge a police report just to be on the safe side, just in case anything happened. So that is what I did in the next couple of days. I lodged the report” (Line 80-82/Hibiscus).

She lodged a police report but did not press charges. Physical abuse by her husband was occasional but the silent treatment and the verbal assaults were an everyday affair. According to Hibiscus, her husband was extraordinarily cruel with words. She just wrote it off. Her husband never tried to hide his snide

remarks and caustic insults. He was more abusive in public, especially when they were visiting his side of the family.

“He [was] always a very sarcastic person. Whenever he said anything, especially where I was concerned, he always put me down. When we [would] go and visit his sister, he would tell his sister all the things that I have done wrong - all the things that in his eyes I did wrong, complaints, complaints, complaints. I kept quiet” (Line 136-140/Hibiscus).

It really hurt Hibiscus when the husband was always complaining about her and never complimented her for anything. Not only did the words hurt but his mannerisms towards her when he was angry and his silent treatment of her also made her sad.

“What was very hard in our relationship was the way he said things to me. He hurt my feelings. And a lot of it has been verbal abuse. Can say emotional abuse as well because when he gets angry, of course he talks very loudly, he shouts at you. Once he gets into that silent anger, it can last into a good week or two, he would give you the silent treatment” (Line 154-158/Hibiscus).

Though Hibiscus never defended herself when being criticized, she felt hurt by her husband’s criticism and the silent treatment that he gave her was also quite unbearable. All this heartless treatment made her emotionally unresponsive to him.

Hibiscus remembered with tears how the husband left her to fend for herself and her then two year old son when the plumber accidentally burst the pipe in the apartment and the pipe had to be turned off for the weekend for repair work. She was burning with anger when she told me how her husband just packed



his bag and left the apartment. I could literally hear her raise her voice when she said:

“And instead of trying to find a solution how best to get around the problem, he packed his bag, left the apartment and went to his mother’s place. Er ... what was is supposed to do? He just packed his bag and left us [volume up] me, my son and our maid then. And my son was about two years old then. You know, I didn’t know what to do and I was getting angry. Instead of finding a solution, he was blaming me. He packed his bag and just left, you know” (Line 117-122/Hibiscus).

It was beyond her imagination that her husband would do such a thing.

Home seemed to become like a jail for her and there was tension at home all the time.

“There is always tension at the home. The tension was very terrible that is why whenever I go to visit my mother, I feel like ... relief, relief (laugh with tears flowing down) (Line 313-315/Hibiscus).

Instead of feeling free at home, Hibiscus felt squeezed and felt she was there just to do the chores, to fulfill wifely duties.

“When at home, in the marital home,[I] felt very squeezed (2x). Ar ... it’s like being a servant, doing the chores and that part of being a wife attending to chores, the evening meal, lah, and all that stuff. But [it was] a marriage which is not a marriage and I have been very unhappy, very unhappy about it all, lah. Er ... never [a] very fulfilling relationship” (Line 319-323/ Hibiscus).

There did not seem to be a sense of being part of a family. With a marital relationship that was unfulfilling, Hibiscus felt like she was staying in jail and was only there to do the household chores. Her husband verbally abused and psychologically alienated her. Her mother knew of her situation and had at times

encouraged her to leave, The thought of leaving did cross her mind, but considerations for her son kept her there.

“Many a time I had been approached by my mother. She knew that I had not been happy and she told me: why don’t you leave? Ehmmn ... on many occasions I wanted to leave, especially after that slap incident, but I thought of my son” (Line 158-161/Hibiscus).

Hibiscus was worried about what would happen to her son if she were to leave.

Would she ever see her son again? She just could not see herself leaving.

“And I just couldn’t see myself doing it even though the option was there” (Line 166/Hibiscus).

Besides the fear of losing her son, she was also afraid of the unknown.

“I couldn’t leave because I was afraid. First, afraid of the unknown. Secondly, afraid of losing contact with my son because at that time he was still very young and I was afraid that he would be brainwashed by my husband” (Line 285-287/Hibiscus).

Afraid to stay, afraid to leave, she felt frozen in place. Many times he had challenged her to leave and commented that he knew she didn’t have the guts to leave. She tried to wrap herself with her son, blunting the edge of her husband’s knife-like words. She even endured repeated taunts and ridicule from her husband.

“We had a real argument and he was telling me “why you still here?” And then [he] ridiculed me. He said he knew I wouldn’t leave, I don’t have the guts to leave. I was tearing inside, I wanted to go but because of my son I stayed on” (Line 171-174/Hibiscus).

Their relationship had turned sour and cold. There was not much communication between them as there were many forbidden subjects and sexual intimacy was also non-existent. She just could not bring herself to be intimate with him.

“Despite living with him [in] the same household, sleeping on the same bed ... but there is nothing between us. Sexual relations also almost came to zilch because I had no wish to be intimate with him” (Line 384-386/Hibiscus).

Fortunately, the husband does not force himself upon her.

Hibiscus stayed on mainly because she felt her son needed a father figure.

“And I did think of moving off, very quietly leaving the house with the boy but I thought to myself that my son is growing up and he needs a father, a father figure to model on. I was always thinking, lah, of my son, not so much about me. That’s why I stayed on” (Line 288-291/Hibiscus).

She mentioned that if the child were a girl, she would have left much earlier. She was also worried that if she left without the child, her husband would not let her see the son again or would brainwash the son influencing him against her.

“And I thought if I were to leave and leave my son, that would be another option. I was thinking, he may not allow me to see my son and when in between my seeing his son, he [would] probably say bad things about me, brainwash the child and make the child believe that I am absolutely no good (voice volume went up). So it was for these reasons I stayed back” (Line 167-171/Hibiscus)

And when she did plan to leave, her son pleaded with her not to leave. So she stayed on. Hibiscus mentioned how the many incidents here and there seem to piece together to help her to leave.

Life paths are never linear, as they appear so only in retrospect. She described one time when her husband again taunted her for not having the guts to leave, and how she snapped at him. She just did the one small action of putting aside the laundry that she had been folding for him. That small action somehow gave her a big relief as if she can do something for herself in such a situation.

“That particular night, er ... he said that and something in me snapped! At that time, he [had] already left the room. At that time I was folding clothes you know and those words were like eating into my mind. Something just yelled: bloody hell, why am I staying here for? to endure all this? You know, as a release of frustration, I started banging things and I was folding clothes and I refused to fold his clothes. Why am I still folding clothes for him when he says things like that to me? So I just threw his clothes to one side and I felt a release then you know” (Line 187-193/Hibiscus).

Though the action may seem insignificant it provided a relief for her and served to build up her strength to eventually leave. Looking back at her marriage, Hibiscus recognized the incident as the start of a series of small changes that, over the next few years, transformed her into the woman who dared to stand up to her husband.

The final push to leave came when her son urged her to move to her mother’s home, when her husband packed his son’s things and put them in the car porch just because she and her son had gone to spend two nights at her mother’s house without him agreeing to the arrangement.

“When we got back home, I saw bags and boxes in the porch. I went out and checked, all my son’s things were in the bags and boxes. He [had] really packed the things and left them in the porch. So my son told me, Mummy come, lets’ stay in Ah Ma’s (grandmother) house” (Line 236-238/Hibiscus).

And just before she left for good, upon their return from her mother's house he gave her a good bash which sent her to the General Hospital.

“So I went back to get it and then I thought that I don't have any clothes with me so packed a few things. On my third trip into the house, he was no longer in the TV area. I guessed [that] he [had] already gone up because on my third trip into the house, he was coming down the stairs. He says I want a divorce, why are you still here [volume up], why you still here, I want a divorce. The next thing I knew he came at me and he was throwing blows at me. And I had to shield myself so I had blows to my head, blows to my shoulder and he kicked me on my back because I turned and faced the wall as he was coming. And I covered and he attacked me where I couldn't [be] covered. That night I had to go to GH and next day, I lodged a report. And from then on we have been living separately” (Line 244-252/Hibiscus).

That was the last straw and she left him and has not returned since. Again she lodged the report but did not press charges.

Not only the immediate family but the community around can make a difference in the lives of abused women -how one treats or responds to a woman who decides to walk out of a violent relationship. For Hibiscus, it was her mother and a supportive community that lived around her that saw her through her leaving period and sustained her in her decision to leave.

“So it was things like [my] mother and the community where we live. This neighborhood is not a neighborhood where we don't know one another. We live in a community where we know quite a good number of people with weekly meetings like that ... cell group ... and when they saw me at my mum's place for a while. Of course they got curious, my mum told them and they had no problem with it. They were very supportive and there were no hard going, nothing drastic that says “hey you did bad, you did a wrong thing”. Everything was very smooth and it's like why didn't I get out much earlier” (Line 345-352/Hibiscus).

Her mother and the community around Hibiscus respected her decision to leave the abusive relationship and they did not condemn her for leaving.

Their support actually caused her to regret not leaving any earlier!

Friends also played an important role in Hibiscus' life after she left.

They came into her life, helped her rebuild her life and helped to restore her confidence in herself.

“People have come into my life, they have helped to make the last three years very happy, very eventful. Like for example the last two years, I was made a beauty queen and sometimes, a couple of times, being up on stage a few times, invited to take part in a parade and these are the events that helped me, [helped] make my life really wonderful you know. Someone who was looking pudgy at one time managed to get back my body shape, become a beauty queen and be given the opportunity to er ... come on stage in a way to perform, it's like finding my voice again. Going out on stage to learn to be an emcee [master of ceremonies] you know, go on to stage to share, these are highlights” (Line 395-403/Hibiscus).

None of the people in Hibiscus's circle laid any guilt on her for deciding to leave the violent relationship. In fact, they were sympathetic, encouraged her and helped to restore her confidence.

Besides having her mother to support her, having a job giving her an income also helped her to ease into her new life.

“I think jobwise there is some income - not that fantastic but still there is some income. My mum is not a wealthy person or anything, but we split things up and she is very supportive to have us there. I am indeed very blessed in that area, lah ... no uphill task” (Line 374-376/Hibiscus).

And she also recognized that there is nothing to stop her except the barriers that she herself erected. She believed that leaving him could not be as bad as remaining with him.

“I guess faith. Faith in my family and faith that everything will turn out right this time around. It can’t be as bad as remaining with him. And once I decided that chapter is closed, there is nothing to stop me now except for the barriers that I put before me” (Line 459-461/Hibiscus).

For Hibiscus, leaving felt like a new beginning after being trapped for so long in her marriage. She said she feels as if she has found a new life after leaving the abusive relationship. She finds herself back to her active self like in her early twenties - she has gone on stage to perform, took part in a parade and earned the beauty queen title after leaving her abusive husband. All these achievements make her feel happy that she was given a second opportunity which she never imagined could happen to her.

To Hibiscus, the most unhappy time in her life thus far was in her marriage life.

“So but in all the time, all this while, my most unhappy moment was when I was with him ... most unhappy moment. And the moment, three years ago when we separated, everything is like loosened, happy, so much happier. In the sense that this [is] freedom and so much more happiness, lah. That’s all I can say about it” (Line 498-501/Hibiscus).

Now that she is separated, she is so much happier and has found much freedom.

Now that she is free, and her mind is at peace, she feels ready to move toward the

future. Not only her but her son is also happier and her mum is also happy to have them staying with her.

“My mum is happy to have me with her. Everybody can see that I am happy, my son is happy” (Line 298-299/Hibiscus).

She went on to say that one should not be tied down in a life of misery. Divorce can be an acceptable choice though the society may not condone it.

“We should not be tied down just because it [leaving/divorce] is not condoned by society. Why make ourselves miserable? Why continue in misery - so just go ahead with it, lah. If I can be happier I am sure many women in the same position that I was in, they are going to be happier without the man. So be it lah” (line 524-527/Hibiscus).

With boldness, she eventually chose to leave that life of pain behind her.

### **Carnation**

It was six-and-a-half years of marriage, six-and-a-half years of feeling neglected, being left alone to do things on her own and being pushed, hit, slapped and degraded. They got to know each other through temple activities. They were both Sikh and were in a close knit community. Though they had their temple ceremony in 2004, her husband never took the initiative to legally register their marriage with the marriage registrar until five years after their temple ceremony when she was five months pregnant. She was angry that she had to push her husband to go for the registration.



“Then over the years, I have been telling my husband let’s go and register. I mean it’s compulsory and all that. He just ignored, ignored, ignored for 5 years until I was [already] pregnant with her (her baby girl was with her) for 5 months. Then I had to force him to go and register” (Line 29-32/Carnation).

Legally, their marriage had only been recorded at the marriage registry for just over a year at the time of the interview, even though their temple ceremony had taken place five years ago. It was a lonely marriage. Carnation felt that her husband was a different person after marriage. He never bothered about her and never went anywhere with her.

“So over the years, after getting married, he is ... I come to know that he is like a different person. He doesn’t go with me anywhere. He doesn’t follow me to any prayer, any function, family function especially my family. He just like ... not bothered, not bothered” (Line 34-37/Carnation).

Carnation was angry and frustrated but there was nothing she could do. She just had to attend functions, prayers, go places on her own and answer people’s queries as to her husband’s whereabouts.

“So I feel like I have been going everywhere alone and people asked me where is your husband. And you know I kept on telling [them] he is busy, he is busy and things like that” (Line 39-41/Carnation).

For the first four years of their marriage, they were staying at her mother-in-law’s house and she thought that maybe if they were to stay on their own her husband might just spend more time with her. So she managed to persuade him to buy an apartment and move to their own home, near to her mother-in-law. However, she

was wrong! The husband did buy an apartment and they did move into their own apartment, but the neglect did not change!

“For four years, after the fourth year, I decided to move out. We bought an apartment. I managed to convince him to get an apartment. We moved out, it’s just near my mother-in-law’s house and there also the situation [was the same]. There I thought maybe staying on our own, he will take out time, you know, life might be a bit different. Move out ... there also the same things” (Line 52-56/Carnation).

It was the same. She felt neglected. She still went everywhere on her own and did things on her own. She felt that she is not to depend on him.

“So I feel neglected, I go everywhere alone, I do everything alone. For me is like I just don’t have [him] to depend on” (Line 58-60/Carnation).

It was just neglect and not being taken notice of in the early years. But things changed when the husband started drinking and getting drunk. That was when the physical abuse began. It was also during this time that she got pregnant. Carnation gave a bitter laugh when she recounted how ironic it was that it all began when she first got pregnant.

“He started drinking, consuming alcohol and all that. Before that he never [drank], then once he started drinking, he comes home drunk ... and all that. At that time, I got pregnant (laugh). You see, for four years, I never got pregnant and that time when he started all these things, I got pregnant” (Line 63-66/Carnation).

She recounted how her husband did not even accompany her to for her prenatal medical check-up. She actually had to fight with him to get him to go with her for the scan.

“A lot of stress, you know, during my pregnancy. Then like my appointments with the doctor, he doesn’t follow. He doesn’t take time out. So after the fifth or sixth months, you know, there is a scan of the baby and al ... so that doctor insisted that you ask your husband to come. That[for] one also I have to fight with him to make him [come with] me. So that was the only one appointment that he came with me to” (Line 68-73/Carnation).

There was a sense of loneliness in her voice as she described her experience. She relived one particularly upsetting incident which revealed to her that her husband did not seem to care about her. It was related to her pregnancy and delivery. It had been a long awaited pregnancy, not getting pregnant till her fifth year of marriage. So she had some hope that the pregnancy could somehow change the situation at home, but it did not. The clubbing and drinking continued on her husband’s part and when she checked on him and questioned his whereabouts, he would not hesitate to be physical with her despite her pregnant state.

“When I checked the phone, when I questioned him, he kicked me, he pressed my hand, pulled me. This was during my pregnancy, ya. So I am not allowed to question him [about] anything. So these things have been going on, going on for nine months. In between, he did hit me, ah, he slapped me er.... he hit me, slapped me, he pulled my hair, he pressed my hand very hard, he pushed me” (Line 102-106/Carnation).

Carnation’s heart grew even colder when the husband did not show up at her delivery. She had to undergo an urgent caesarean after going for one of the check-ups. She called her husband and told him about the situation. She told him the time of the operation and requested that he bring from home the bags that were packed for her delivery. He agreed but when the time came, he did not show up till it was late at night.

“When I was admitted to the hospital, I [had] actually [gone just] for a check-up, the doctor told me a Caesarean [had to be done] urgently, because there were some complications ... and all. I called my husband. I told him I am going in [for] the operation at 1 o’clock. I called him at 11am and I called him. I told him I am going to deliver at 1 pm so if you can, try to come early. So I told him to bring my bag because I didn’t bring my things. I wasn’t planning to deliver. I just went for [an] appointment, so I didn’t bring the bag. So I tell him to bring the bag. He says ‘okay’ and all that” (Line 108-114/Carnation).

He said okay but he never turned up till at night with a friend. He stayed for an hour and left. He did not visit Carnation in hospital after that and did not bother to take her and the baby home the day they were discharged from the hospital. He sent his staff to give Carnation the money for the hospital bill. It was so disheartening for Carnation to see that her husband could not be bothered about her.

“You see he just like ... not bothered lah. Then after that, the next day, the whole day I was in hospital he didn’t come to see me or see her [the baby]. And then the third day, you know ... want to [be] discharged and want to pay the bill ... also he didn’t come. He sent one of his staff to pass me the money and I have to settle the bill myself” (Line 127-130/Carnation).

Carnation shudders as she described the episode during her confinement where her mother witnessed her husband pulling her hair and waking her up from sleep. Her mother had to actually stop her husband from doing that.

“This is during confinement (emphasize) when my mum was at home with me. He came home, he like got so angry why I question him. I was sleeping on the chair and he came, he pulled my hair and he drag me to the main door” (Line 143-146/Carnation).

Carnation recalled another time when she was nursing the baby and he came, hit her on the head and she nearly drop the baby in her hand due to the pain.

“There was another time, I was breast feeding her and he came hit on my head so hard and I nearly, she nearly fell lah because of the pain ar, luckily he managed to hold her” (Line 154-155/Carnation).

After that, Carnation thought long and hard about leaving. She took careful stock of her situation. Finances were not a problem; she had a degree and could easily get a job. Her mother was happy for her to move back to stay with her.

Carnation was disturbed by her husband’s drinking and clubbing habit and she felt worn out by having to care for the baby all by herself and also worried about an absent husband. It caused her great stress and tension. She felt very alone. And she felt lonely all day as it is only her and the baby at home, no one is helping her to care for the baby. The husband was out all night.

“Whether he is there or not that don’t make any difference. And then er, he comes back, he only sees her about 10 minutes a day and out he goes again. Is always like that. Then also, he used to drink and all” (Line 173-175/Carnation).

One point in time she even told her mother in law that she had have enough of what the husband is doing and is planning to leave him. Her mother-in-law told her to be patient with her husband and give him a chance to change.

“Then [at] one point in time, I told my mother-in-law that er ... is no more already, enough is enough and I am planning to leave” (Line 176-177/Carnation).

Carnation wanted her mother-in-law to know of her plan so that she would not be blamed for leaving.

“I told my mother-in-law because I wanted her to know what was going on. It’s not that I didn’t tell, then suddenly I leave and they put the blame on me. No, I want her to know [about] what has been going on. I told her, but not all about my feelings lah, but what he does and all that” (Line 545-548/Carnation).

At the stage when she was contemplating leaving, she also began to take action and do what was necessary. Carnation settled the house bills out of her own savings and did not bother to ask her husband for money. She disconnected all the utility services at their marital home so that she did not need to worry about the bills coming after she left.

“I just disconnected the phone, Astro, electricity and all these things. I just paid from my money and I was not going back to the house again so I might as well settle instead of let the bills come in” (Line 335-337/Carnation).

In many ways Carnation had been handling things at home all by herself and, because she was a graduate, she believed she would be able to support herself. So it was not that she was dependent on her husband. She did not want to go on tolerating the things that her husband did to her; as she saw it:

“Because I see, I stay with him I am also single, I don’t stay with him also I am fine. It’s not that I am dependent on him. And I think enough of all this nonsense, all these lies and things like that. And it’s not that I am not educated, I am an IT [Information Technology] graduate” (Line 212-215/ Carnation).

Because of her education, she is confidence of herself.

All this while during their married life he had been absent. When she found that she did not want to tolerate all his nonsense such as clubbing till late at night, coming home drunk and hitting her, not being involved in her and the baby's life, she decided to give up on the relationship.

Way before she actually left, the seed of leaving was already germinating underground. All the little events, his indifferent attitude and unwillingness to be involved caused Carnation to ponder her marriage and she began to see that it made no difference in her life whether she had a husband or not. That was when the seed of leaving began to grow. The breaking point came when the husband went to Nepal instead of attending her sister's wedding with her in Singapore, as he had originally promised.

“Just before I left, my sister got married in June. I left in July. So in June, I told him ... I said she is getting married and we have to go to Singapore and [to] the dinner function. At first he promised he would go with me, so I say okay. Let's wait until ... actually earlier I also [had] decided that I wanted to leave. So I thought never mind, since the wedding is coming, I don't want to cause any problems. I say never mind, wait and see if he goes with me to Singapore or not” (Line 257-262/Carnation).

She was even prepared to forego attending her sister's wedding and to go to Nepal with him, but just kept quiet about the whole issue.

“And during the Singapore week, he wants to go to Nepal. And I told him since you are going I also want to go because I have not gone anywhere with him. I say buy me a ticket, I want to go. So for a month he just kept quiet” (Line 262-264/Carnation).

However, he quietly made the travel arrangements for himself only and told her about his travel plans only because he wanted her to bring his luggage to him.

She kept quiet but was furious by his move.

“So the day he wanted to leave ... evening he calls me. He says bring my bag and clothes, I am leaving for Nepal tonight. I got so angry but just kept quiet lah” (Line 270-271/Carnation).

The thought of leaving had been there for some time but she wanted to give him another chance and to wait for the right time.

“Because earlier I’d already thought, I mean I’d thought about it ... leaving, I’d thought about leaving. Give [him] another chance, give [him] another chance, wait for the right time” (Line 302-304/Carnation).

This act by her husband was the final straw that broke the camel’s back. Though she remained quiet when her husband left for Nepal and she went with her family to attend her sister’s wedding in Singapore, her heart was saddened. So after this incident, she began to get information about leaving. Being a vice-president of the Sikh Women’s Society, she was aware of women’s organizations such as AWAM. She actually called to inquire about what she should do if she wanted to leave an abusive marriage.

Carnation left because she had lost hope in her husband. She saw that the situation was not going to change and, in fact, it had worsened.

I didn’t see things getting better, I didn’t see thing getting better. It’s just [getting] worse from day to day. Then because I am educated, I can apply for a job and I can earn a good salary [compared with] what I was getting from him” (Line 482-484/Carnation).



She was confident that she could earn a good salary and she felt that after all that she had done for his family she did not deserve the kind of life that her husband was putting her through. She repeatedly mentioned this during the interview.

“I don’t deserve it lah. You know, I feel like I don’t deserve all this because I also have done a lot for the family which he cannot do. And ah ... after doing everything ar ... helping all the extended family and all that, still he [was] treating me like that. It made me feel like I don’t deserve ... I feel like I deserve a better treatment” ( Line 384..387/Carnation).

Carnation left the day after her husband hit her another time in front of her mother-in-law following his Nepal trip.

“The day before ... he hit me again in front of my mother-in-law and her (the baby) because I questioned him over something. So he hit [me] on my back and he pulled my hair and the next day I left the house” (Line 180-182/Carnation).

She also went to file a police report after leaving her abusive husband, but she did not press charges against him.

Carnation’s husband never bothered to hide the fact that he beat his wife. He not only beat her in front of Carnation’s mother and his own mother, he even told his friends that he beat his wife.

“He wants to show he is in control, he doesn’t listen to the wife and he even tells his friends that I beat my wife ... he tells!” (Line 279-280/Carnation).

When she was ready to leave, her family was there for her - no questions, no reprimands, nothing but unconditional support.

“So I cannot tolerate all this nonsense already and one day I just called my mother and told her that I [had] left. I am coming back. Ya, my mother didn’t say anything, she is supporting me actually. She is supporting me” (Line 217-219/Carnation).

Not only her mother, but her brother was also supportive of her decision to leave the abusive relationship; they encouraged her not to bother about others’ comments.

“Also the encouragement from my brother and my mother ... they also said don’t bother about what people say, that people talk. That gave me a bit of courage. Ya, why [should I] want to bother? (Line 714-716/Carnation).

It is quite common that people would talk, but with the support of her mother and brother she was not so bothered about this.

When Carnation left, her husband’s family tried to get her uncle to intervene, but Carnation would not change her decision. Her uncle is a priest and did not agree that she should seek a divorce for fear of tarnishing the family name, but Carnation would not be persuaded. She was determined to leave:

“So after I left and then they called my uncle and [asked him] to get involved, try to patch us up and all that. My uncle being a priest, for him, divorce is a no, no thing lah, you know. So he tried hard to convince me to go back. What will people think ... you are spoiling our name and this kind of thing in the society and all that. So I told him the whole story, yet he told me to go back. Because for them, their reputation, their name all these things lah [are important]. Then I told him ‘no’ and all that” (Line 187-192/Carnation).

Though Carnation’s uncle knew that her husband was physically abusive and was a drunk, still he encouraged her to return to her husband.

Carnation was firm in her decision, as she now realized that she needed to care for her own welfare rather than for the so-called family reputation

and name. Even when her uncle persuaded her to consider reconciliation for the sake of the child, she would not relinquish her decision. Carnation had already given up hope of her husband ever caring for her and their daughter. She also had learnt not to bother about what others would say about her status of being a single mother. She was firm in her decision to leave.

“When my uncle was involved, they told me, you never think about her, think about your daughter, what if she asks for her father? You know people will say all these things lah. And ... I don’t bother lah. For me [it] was like when she was in my stomach, you think my husband cared ... ar? No ... right! I [will] take care of her, God only is taking care. So for me it’s like [I] don’t have to worry” (Line 360-365/Carnation).

She believed that God would care for her and her daughter.

Carnation’s own childhood experiences influenced her in leaving as she saw the history of her father repeating with her husband. She did not think he was going to change and believed that once he had started to lay hands on her, the habit would not change. It is insights such as this that will lead women to decide to permanently exit an abusive relationship.

“And the reason why I saw that he will not change is because my father is also an alcoholic. I have seen what he has been doing over the years ... it’s what my husband is doing. I see the same thing repeating and I know that these people will never change. And I also know that once the man [places] his hand on the woman, he will never stop doing it. He will carry on” (Line 220-223/Carnation).

Carnation felt that it was the short prayers that she makes regularly that strengthened her:

“God, ya it’s God ... Yes, it’s the small prayers that you do and from there you actually get the strength lah, I feel” (Line 470-471/Carnation).

She felt that once the thought of leaving was there, one should not wait too long as she believed God would straighten up whatever was necessary.

“For me it’s once you already have the thought, don’t wait too long. You have the thought and you think it’s not worth it, just let go. God will adjust everything, ya everything, he will adjust. Even if you stay it’s a little bit of a struggle. If you don’t stay it’s a little bit of struggle, but just for the time being and after that things will be better” (Line 523-527/Carnation).

She believes that one may have to struggle for a little while, but then things will be better. Though her husband threatened to break into the house and take away their daughter, Carnation saw through his threats and was not in any way taken aback by it. She stood firm in her decision to divorce him.

“Then he even threatened my uncle that he will come to the house, he will send people, he will break the door and he will take the girl and all that. I told my uncle that is all just threats. He is trying to make me frightened and all that”(Line 204-206/Carnation).

Carnation commented that life on her own is so much happier and tension free:

“If I am on my own, I can be earning more and I [have] no stress, no nothing. Now so much happier, so much tension free, really” (Line 234-235/ Carnation).

She is able to earn her own living and she feels more positive and able to accomplish more.

“After leaving, no stress, don’t have to worry about all this nonsense and all that. Now I [am] more positive, more ar ... I feel like I can do so much ... better things, I feel that ... totally different lah (2x). So much better now” (Line 441-442/Carnation).

After she left, Carnation worked part time and her mother helped her with child care. Her younger brother was there to help support her financially.

Carnation felt that besides family support, there is power in letting go.

“Family support yes ... also the power to let go. Some women cannot let go. They don’t mind staying and facing the problem [rather] than letting go. So it’s also just let go of the problem” (Line 466-468/Carnation).

Carnation was so determined that leaving was the best option for her that she commented that even if all her family members had not been supportive of her decision to leave, she would still have left without involving them. She would have made alternative plans for leaving.

“If everybody tell you to go back, er ... you can go back, but if that happened to me, er ... everybody tell me to go back, I may go back. I may stay with him for a while, [while] I look for a place. I would do that and I would not get my family involved, I would do that” (Line 636-638/Carnation).

While she was still in the abusive relationship, Carnation did not tell anyone about her situation - only her mother-in-law because she did not want to be blamed for breaking up the marriage.

“No I never used to tell anyone. I told my mother-in-law because I wanted her to know what was going [on]. [So it was] not that I didn’t tell then suddenly I leave and they put the blame on me.” (Line 545-547/Carnation).

Her husband never tried to hide his snide remarks and caustic insults. He was more abusive in public. He did not bother to censor himself. The abuse was not anything he felt he needed to hide.

### **Daisy**

They met at their workplace in Singapore. He was an engineer in the factory while she was a factory girl. Since both are Malaysian, they had a lot in common to talk about and it was during those evening chats that love blossomed between them. The troublesome patterns, Daisy began to realize, had been evident early in their dating period and then their marriage. First, he wanted to save for the wedding, but he spent half of the money saved paying for his parents' housing loan and then kept the rest for himself. He did not even want to have Daisy's parents there to witness the wedding ceremony.

“Like *kahwin lari* (run away marriage) like that. He said I don't want to see your parents, like this control. I [was] quiet” (Line 680/Daisy).

Though she cried about her husband's unreasonable request, yet she conformed to his wishes.

“I [was] quiet but I [was] crying. I called my mother, I [was] crying, I tell my mother, Ma, I don't know why [it's] like this. The same time, I cannot leave him. I don't know why” (Line 682-684/Daisy).

It made her feel like she was running away to get married, yet she felt bound by her husband's decision. Her love for him kept her bound. She even changed her religion from being a Catholic to a Hindu as her husband demanded.

“My husband said [I] have to follow his religion, have to follow.  
So I follow because I love him already. I cannot leave him so I say  
‘Okay, I [will] follow you’” (Line 98-99/Daisy).

As her marriage had been her own choice, she never shared with her parents about the kind of abuse she received from her husband. She felt that she needed to endure it and did not wish to burden her parents with her misery and make them sad.

“Because this [is the] life I chose [on] my own, how come I  
[should] want to tell you all? Later you all must [be] sad, that is  
why I didn’t want to tell anything” (Line 489-490/Daisy).

She also endured it for the sake of the children, because she wanted to give her children a complete family.

“So I shifted to Ipoh, I [was] also not happy, really not happy. But  
because my husband told me ...I followed also. I [was] just quiet  
because of my children’s future, that’s why. I cannot take any  
decisions. I must think of my children’s future” (Line 205-  
207/Daisy).

Her husband was a professional and was quite controlling. The control was subtle. Daisy was asked to stop work on the pretext that he could take care of her.

“My husband said never mind lah, you stop your job. I am  
working. I can [take] care of you” (Line 672/Daisy).

Daisy obliged because she loved him and in the first four years of the marriage, he was controlling but not physically abusive. The situation took a turn for the worse when her parents-in-law moved in to stay with them. She and her husband were staying in Johore while her in-laws lived in Ipoh. After her father-in-law had

an accident, the in-laws moved to stay with them in Johore. And later, the in-laws were able to persuade her husband to get Daisy and children to move back to stay with them in Ipoh rather than the in-laws staying with them in Johore. Her husband wanted her to take care of his parents as she was the only housewife in the family, not otherwise employed. It was from then her nightmare began.

“That time my father-in-law, mother-in-law [were] staying with me together. From there starts my problem” (Line 177/Daisy)

The in-laws promised to give the house in Ipoh to her husband if she were to move to the in-law’s house in Ipoh to take care of them. Initially she was reluctant to part from her husband, but her husband promised to visit her each month in Ipoh. For the sake of keeping the peace, Daisy complied with the request.

“After that I think, think, think don’t want. Later my husband and me fight, fight, cannot *tahan* (bear) [it] already. I also follow lah, follow his parents. I say okay lah, you tell me like this, you have to promise me every month, you must visit me and your children. He say okay, okay. After that we shifted to Ipoh” (Line 198-201/Daisy).

She and her children moved to stay with her in-laws in Ipoh while her husband remained working in Singapore. It was the beginning of many sufferings that Daisy endured living with her in-laws and was also when her husband began to be physically abusive.

“That time I stayed in my in-laws’ house. So that time I very (sic) suffered I tell you. I stayed there, I very suffered. They all take me as [being a] house maid, cannot go outside. All treated me like a house maid” (Line 22-24/Daisy).



Not only was her husband controlling, her in-laws were also controlling. They even dictated what she could or could not wear at home and she was not allowed to go out of the house alone.

“Very controlled when I stayed with my mother-in-law, cannot use jeans, t-shirt cannot ... [must] always use the *kain batik* (batik clothes) like an estate girl” (Line 654-655/Daisy).

Rarely was she allowed to visit her parents and make friends outside. She must have permission from her husband to do anything. Her husband controlled her socially and financially. She was lonely, confined to the house and there was no one she could share her misery with while in Ipoh.

“No, no friends, just stay inside the house. Anything [I] want to share ... also nobody” (Line 484/Daisy).

Her husband never discussed finances with her or allowed her to have access to money. An allowance of RM50 was given to her on each of her husband’s visits through her mother-in-law as her husband thought she was not capable of managing finances.

“As for money, every month he comes back, he gave [it] to his mother lah. ...and told her to give me RM50, RM50 is enough for me. I didn’t know how much he earned. He is the one controlling all the money. When staying with his parents, he gave the money in front of me ... all to his mother, said I didn’t know how to manage [it]. I didn’t know how to use the money” (L661-668/Daisy).

Daisy tearfully mentioned how she had to follow her husband’s instructions to avoid being beaten.

“Like whatever my husband tells, I must listen. If I won’t listen he would beat me... okay” (Line 447/Daisy).

Whatever her husband said to her, she would just listen. Even when she was angry she dared not show her feelings, for fear of being beaten.

“Whatever he said, whatever he said, very get angry but [I] cannot show [it]. [I was] scared [that] later he would beat me, scared like that” (Line 685-686/Daisy).

She mentioned that her husband would not hesitate to slap her in front of her in-laws and her father-in-law did nothing about it.

“Suddenly my husband ... do what you know? Slapped me, slapped me. The father [seemed] very happy” (Line 454/Daisy).

She was disappointed that her father-in-law did not do anything to stop the violence..

All this while Daisy obeyed and stayed on. She thought that it was for their future. But then he made it clear that he had a girlfriend and wanted to spend time with her. It was never going to be about Daisy and her husband. The light went on. He made it clear to Daisy that he chose to be with his girlfriend and Daisy was only there to take care of the children. It was always going to be about her husband and what he wanted. This realization caused her great pain and brought her to a point where she had to make a decision.

“Okay, my husband called me, told me what you know. Okay, okay you take care of the kids, I have to follow my girlfriend. All [this] made my heart very pained. [It was] very painful. I cannot *tahan* (bear) [it] with my father-in-law, mother-in-law also [causing me] pain, heart pain. My husband also did this to me. So I made the decision, there is no point [in] staying here. I called my parents and asked my parents to come down” (Line 261-265/Daisy).

The choice made by Daisy's husband caused her to be heartbroken. She saw no point in staying on after all she had endured. As she found the pain too much to bear, she finally confided in her mother about her husband's affair. Her parents told her it was not worth living such a life and they encouraged her to leave.

“My parents say like ... this life you don't want. Like ... this life you don't want. The time you stay there [you have] suffered [at lot] ... never mind, I want [that] my daughter is happy. If you [are a] single mum also never mind. I want you happy. Like this ... life is no use” (Line 64-67/Daisy).

Leave she did. From the time she told her mother to the time she left, it was only a week, but it had been a long eight years from the day she married until the day she walked out in 2008.

Knowing that her in-laws would prevent her from leaving if they knew that was what she intended to do, Daisy tried to behave as normally as possible even though she had already arranged for her parents to come and pick her up.

“So [at] that time, I let my sis-in-law go to school as normal. My son also went to school like normal” (Line 604/Daisy).

She still asked her father-in-law to take her to her son's school to buy food for him as he was new in school.

And while at the school canteen away from her father-in-law, she called her father and gave him direction as to where she lived and set a time for him to be there.

“Okay after that around 10 o’clock, I went to my son’s school, my father-in-law brought me lah. [I] wanted to buy breakfast for my son. That time [was his] first month at the school, my boy right, so I went to the school to buy him breakfast, I went to the canteen there, I called my father. Asking him ‘where is he?’ and I gave him my address and directions to my house. (Where *apah*? Okay my father asked: what is the address? Later I tell my father, this way, this way, to find the house). I say don’t come now, you come around 11 o’clock. Okay sharp 11 o’clock” (Line 604-610/Daisy).

She had packed all her important documents well before her parents came to pick her up so that she would be ready to leave immediately her parents arrived.

“Before that, I took the very important documents. My birth certificate ... all are downstairs. My room is upstairs. Before that I took the album, the certificates, marriage certificate ... all [this] I prepared. [I was] going to keep [them] upstairs inside my cupboard making sure they all never came inside. If I before that [I went] out, they always checked my cupboard -what things I buy ... all like this, this kind of stupid thing. So I packed all the things [and] I didn’t go out, staying at the house lah. After my mother come down [from Melaka to Ipoh], [I] just put [the things] inside a bag and went” (Line 629-635/Daisy).

Since she knew of her in-law’s habits of checking her cupboard if she went out of the house, the week before she left and after she had taken the important documents to keep in her cupboard, she did not leave the house to go anywhere to avoid raising any unnecessary suspicions. She did not take everything but only the essential documents such as birth certificates and the marriage certificate. She also took the children’s clothes and school bags. All books and clothing were just

thrown into a big plastic bag when she and the children left the marital home with her parents.

Daisy's family was her strong support. Daisy's parents were fully behind her in her decision to leave. They supported her financially, housed her and her children and provided child care while she worked. Not only did her parents support her financially, her siblings also helped her financially if she needed it. Even though she is not from a wealthy family, it is a close knit family.

"I tell you my family also like ... not have money one, you know, poor family also. But after I came down here, my parents supported me" (Line 425-426/Daisy).

Daisy was aware of her own situation. She knew she needed to work in order to provide for her children, though her parents were supportive. She tried to get a job as soon as she could though it did not pay much.

"But I cannot be a burden on my parents because my parents, my father, [is] also [a] sick man. My mother [is a] housewife so I think my own self, I cannot sit like this, wait until my father gives money to me. I [must quickly] find job. Jan 30 I came down from the house, on March 1 found a job as a sales girl at RM500 basic [wage per month]. Never mind, RM500 ... also never mind. I find ... the job, after that little bit [by] little bit I cover (Line 426-431/Daisy).

Daisy did her best to provide for her children after leaving. She got herself a job immediately after leaving her abusive husband, though she had not worked for the past eight years during her marriage. Though her pay was very low, her parents and siblings were all willing to chip in to support her whenever necessary. Her mother and sister helped with child care while she worked.

“Sometimes [when] I didn’t have money, my father gave me[some]. But after my father passed away, sometimes my brother also helped me, sometimes the money I want to use, my brother gave me. Sometimes my sister gave [money to] me, all [helped to] cover me” (Line 432-434/Daisy).

Besides her family, she drew strength from her religion. She prayed and asked for guidance whenever she needed it. She found comfort in Jesus.

“Sometimes cannot cover [the expenses] but my brother [and] sister [helped]me. At least I feel happy, I [am] very happy, I tell you. My Jesus Christ accept me again, that is very important to me. Sometimes I [was] very sad, I came here (to church) early. The class [was] starting [at] 10 o’clock, [at] 9 o’clock I [would] come and sit here. I prayed. I felt like [I would] cool down ... like that” (Line 517-521/Daisy).

Daisy valued the freedom she had after leaving her ex-husband. It was important to her that she was able to do as she pleased without control from her ex-husband.

“Now, I really felt good. Now I feel free. One more thing, whatever I do, I can make [the] decision. Last time I didn’t know what to do, now I know. Now I learn, I came here I learnt a lot of things ... what is life. Now I have friends ... a lot. Whenever [there is a] problem, I can talk with my friends, I can talk with my parents ... like that” (Line 472-475/Daisy).

No longer was she just “trapped” at home, she was learning new skills, meeting new friends and making decisions for her own life instead of being controlled by her husband. She feels that she has learned so much since leaving her abusive husband. She can do whatever she wants.

She is now so much happier.

“Yes now I feel happier. You see, now I want to do whatever. My mother supports me. At least I feel happy, I [am] very happy I tell you” (Line 516-517/Daisy).

She is also more assertive and is able to stand up against her former husband which she never was able to do before.

“Now I can answer back to my husband. That is why now my husband says ... ar, you go back to Melaka, your words [are] all changing already. That is good, I say good. Now you come and beat me lah, I’ll show you, I’ll show you. You think what? All I quiet only ... ar, no way. That one is last time xxx, stupid girl, now I show you” (Line 690-694/Daisy).

She no longer just remains quiet. She even dares to challenge her ex-husband..

In Ipoh, the balance of power in Daisy’s marriage had tipped heavily toward her husband. Still, Daisy found ways to claim back some of the power, a bit at a time. Whenever she is sad, her son hugs her and says: “Don’t cry Mummy, I love you.” That brings comfort to Daisy and helps her to carry on in her life. Daisy leans toward me, her eyes searching for mine, checking to see if I understand. The decision to leave was not an easy one. Though her parents were not very rich, they were supportive of her. She still needed to find work to support herself and the two children. Within a month, Daisy had found a job even though it paid only RM500 a month, but her parents were behind her. She moved in to stay with them, and settled down to raise her two children alone. Her husband did urge her to come back and went to the son’s school trying to take away her son from her, but he was not successful as Daisy had informed the school teacher about her situation.

Freedom does not always announce itself with parades and fireworks. For Daisy, one of the best parts of leaving has been the freedom to learn sewing. Her husband had forbidden her to learn sewing which now is her hobby. She proudly showed me her full sewing bags, as she was having a sewing class after our interview session. Daisy was grateful that when she was ready to leave, her family was there for her - no questions, no reprimands, nothing but unconditional support. Daisy believes that religion also helped her as she worked to rebuild her life. After she walked out of the marriage, she returned to Catholicism. She took comfort in the familiar rituals of Sunday mass and often came early to sit in church and pray before she went off to her sewing class.

### **An Overview of the Research Questions**

In this study, there were two research questions: 1) “How did abused women arrive at the decision to leave an abusive relationship?” and, 2) “What is the experience of leaving like?”. These two research questions were posed with the intention of providing in-depth inquiry to help understand the phenomenon of abused women leaving intimate partner violence. An in-depth analysis was conducted and an in-depth description of the study findings is reported with the aim of answering the above research questions. The details of the research findings are reported in the following section.



## **Findings**

A total of five themes emerged from the study. They were: (1) the experience of abuse; (2) the turning point; (3) factors affecting leaving; (4) a permanent exit; and, (5) life after leaving. Emerging from each of these primary categories were additional factors and patterns. Figure 4.1 illustrates the experience of leaving an abusive relationship, the factors affecting the leaving, as well as life after leaving. Each of the themes are reported as follows.

### **Experiences of Abuse**

Home is a place where there should be love and respect. Home is often seen as a place of protection. But this was not the experience for the seven survivors of abuse who were interviewed. They were battered physically and emotionally by the men who were supposed to love and protect them. Verbal outbursts, threats and violence were part of everyday life.

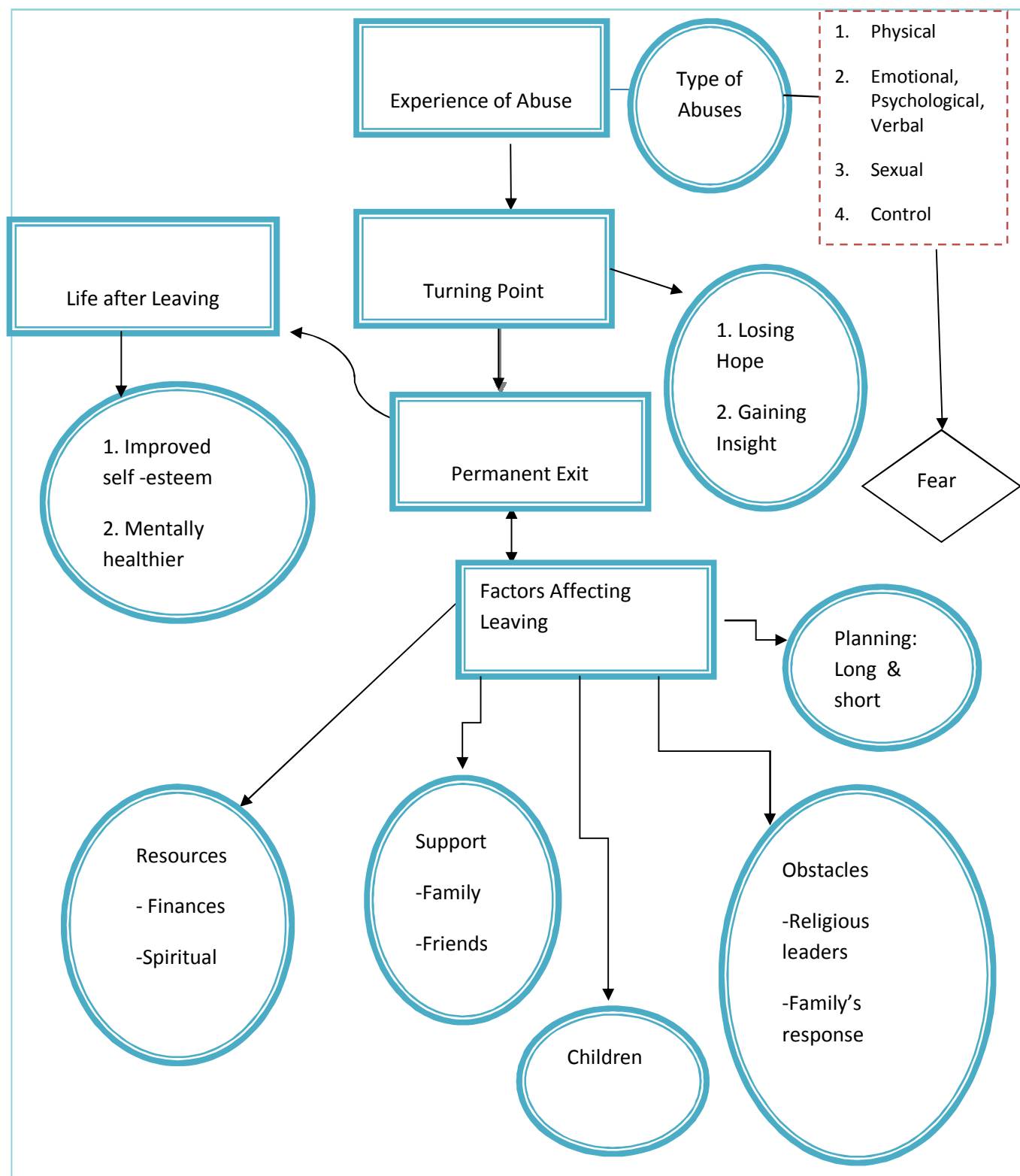
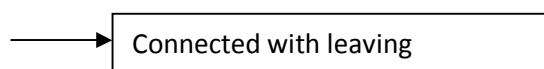


Figure 4.1 Concept Map of overall findings.



## **Types of abuses**

I first started by exploring the experiences of abuse of these survivors of abuse in their married life. There was no set pattern as to how the abuse occurred or when the women recognized that the relationship was abusive. Each story and experience was different. Each woman described what her experience of abuse was like. The type of abuse that these women suffered ranged from physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and being controlled. As in the Duluth model, men use a wide range of abusive behavior to control their female partners. Living in such abusive environments resulted in fear in the women's lives.

**Physical abuse.** We often hear the saying "home sweet home". For these women, however, home was where the torture took place. All seven participants described a time when they were physically beaten by their ex-husbands, though there was not necessarily acute injury that sent them to the emergency department for treatment. Acts of physical abuse experienced by these women included slapping, kicking, hair-pulling, throwing, twisting, and use of a weapon.

One of the participants, Orchid, compared her married life as living in hell. Bruises and verbal outbursts were part of her daily life. She had to wear long sleeves to cover up her blue-black bruises every other day.

"Life is difficult for me, which is true as he is the one that is a bad tempered kind of person. So when he is angry, he... he... he picked on me. Every time I have bruises on my body, all the time. (Line 85-87/Orchid).

Carnation did not get black eyes or fractured bones, but her hair was being pulled, and she was slapped, pushed and shoved by her husband. Whenever she questioned his whereabouts, he would not hesitate to be rough with her even she was pregnant or when she was holding her baby in her arms.

“When I questioned him, he kicked me, he pressed my hand, pulled me. This was during my pregnancy ... ya. So I am not allowed to question him [about] anything. So these things have been going on. In between, he did hit me, ah, he got ... slapped me er.... he got ... hit me, slapped me, he pulled my hair, he pressed my hand very hard, he pushed me, you know. It has been going on like that” (Line 102-107/Carnation).

Lily was hit till she fainted at one time. Jasmine had the whole table of food thrown at her after the husband deemed it inedible and locked her in a dark room as a punishment. Hibiscus was hit and pushed down the stairs. Rose was told that if he (the husband) really wanted to kill her, he could have easily have done so (he was a karate black belt) - as if to say what she got was only a minor chiding. A slap here and a hit there was common for Daisy if she did not heed her husband's advice or if she went against his instructions. It seems like beating was her husband's way of controlling and forcing her into obedience. The phrase “I have to follow what my husband says” often surfaced in the interview with Daisy. Any sign of disobedience would result in a beating, so to avoid the beating she tended to oblige.

All the women have made police reports regarding the violence, but none of them pressed charges against the abuser except Rose who is a legal professional herself. Her husband was found guilty and was fined by the court. However, Lily who is also a legal professional did not press charges as she

distrusted the justice system in the country and feared that her rich husband's family might be able to somehow influence the justice system. The others just filed a police report for record purposes, preparing for the child custody battle in the event that they sought a divorce.

Orchid reported her case and the police remanded the husband for investigation, but no charge was made against him. The women in this study also indicated that besides being beaten, the most prevalent type of abuse was psychological abuse and described their experiences as being put down, ridiculed, controlled and continually questioned.

**Emotional and psychological abuse.** Emotional and psychological abuses are forms of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) which use deliberate manipulation and intimidation over long periods to destroy victims' self-esteem and self-worth. Many a time, verbal insults and abusive words are being hurled at the women. It is easier to define it as abuse if there is broken bone or black eye when you look into the mirror, but it is harder to pin down the cruel insults or oblique threats - the words melting away even as one attempts to examine them. Other tactics including intimidation, coercion and threats, isolation, minimizing, denying and blaming were used. The women in this study described all of these experiences. Weiss (2000) mentioned that just like physical abuse, psychological abuse has nothing to do with anger. It is just a means to an end, where the desire is to control.

One of the participants, Hibiscus, described how the isolation made her feel like she was staying in jail and she was only there to do the household chores. Her husband verbally abused and psychologically alienated her. Many times he had challenged her to leave and commented that he knew she had no guts to leave. He would often give her a cold shoulder and the cold treatment could last for months. Not only were the words hurtful, but the mannerisms he used towards her when angry, and the silent treatment also made her sad.

“What was very hard in our relationship was the way he said things to me. He hurt my feelings. And a lot of it has been verbal abuse. Can say emotional abuse as well because when he gets angry, of course he talks very loudly, he shouts at you. Once he gets into that silent anger, it can last into a good week or two, he would give you the silent treatment” (Line 154-158/Hibiscus).

Lily described how her husband switched to verbal and psychological abuse when he found out that Lily had disclosed to others details of his physical abuse. He would throw things at her rather than really hitting her and commented that he knew that would not hurt her.

“A lot of it was psychological especially when I had told people about the physical abuse. He was embarrassed. At first he told [me] to never tell anyone, in the end I did. When he found out he was very embarrassed so he changed it more from physical to psychological. So he would like throw things at me and say “see I know that won’t hurt you” (Line 32-36/Lily2).

This kind of psychological threat caused her to be fearful all the time as she never knew when it could become physical. Lily felt like she was walking on eggshells all the time as she did not know when the husband would explode and she never

knew what it was that triggered the explosion. She would have to sit through his temper tantrum knowing that it might at any time erupt into physical violence.

Rose was not allowed to question her husband's whereabouts and her husband would not pick up her calls. Her husband was known to have other women besides her. Her husband constantly degraded her intelligence even though she is a professional. She was constantly reminded by her husband that the house was not in her name. She was told by her husband to remain stupid so they can have a good life together.

Daisy's husband not only beat her if she did not obey everything he said, he also expected her to accept his extra-marital affairs. Her husband even threatened to kill her and the children upon learning that Daisy had disclosed to his family, that he was having an extramarital affair.

However, Carnation's husband had no qualms about telling people or friends that he actually beat his wife. She felt neglected and repeatedly said that her husband just did not bother about her and the baby.. Her husband even beat her during her confinement in the presence of her mother. She felt as if she was a single woman as her husband never attended any functions with her nor took her for any holidays.

Orchid's husband always called her "stupid" but she managed to brush aside his degrading remark as her undergraduate studies undertaken while still in the relationship helped her to maintain her sense of intelligence. He also constantly degraded her ability as a housewife and constantly complained about

the ways forks and spoons were being washed, ways the napkins were being folded and how she would mess up the house.

Jasmine's husband has to no qualm about calling her a slut or a prostitute whether in person or over the phone. He was constantly checking on her when she called home to say she is working extra hours or she would be home late.

**Sexual abuse.** Sexual intimacy between couples is an expression of love and is one of the most wonderful ways to express love between couple. But for one of the participants, Jasmine, she felt that she was being raped rather than being loved by her husband.

“.....And I feel like I am being raped instead having, making love. And every time if I say no, the more that I say no, he started to get mad, throw things. So, every time you are just like a doll, just, just being there” (Line 548-550/Jasmine).

She had no freedom to say 'no' to him as it would lead to physical abuse. She felt she was like a doll for the husband to play with anytime he fancied just to fulfill his needs.

Out of the seven participants, only Jasmine experienced sexual abuse. The other six participants had the liberty to reject their husbands' sexual demands. Rose actually advised that women should decline their husband's sexual advances if he has been having an extra-marital affair. This is as a protection for themselves, to avoid the possibility of contracting sexually transmitted diseases.



Besides the abuses mentioned above, the women also had to deal with their husbands attempting to control them.

**Control.** Male power and control which supports and condones male violence against women, is the central concept in the power and control wheel (the Duluth Model). Feminists also argue that the root of abuse is a power imbalance. Violence does not erupt because men are incapable of managing their anger or because they are deficient in nonviolent conflict resolution skills. Battering is one of the many strategies of male control over women. This current research supports this feminist position. All but one of the women interviewed said that control was an issue in their marriages and enumerated multiple ways that their husband tried to control their lives in such areas as: whether or not they worked, whether or not they had access to money, what they spent money on, where they lived and with whom, with whom they socialized and how often and what they cooked, and what they wore. All of the women stated that they did not feel like they could do the things that they wanted to in the marital home. For these women, it was a life of being controlled by the man.

One of the participants, Orchid, described her ex-husband as an obsessive compulsive person as he would make sure that she washed her feet with soap every single time before she entered the house. No guest was allowed into the house because they would contaminate it. She was not allowed to cook even for their baby as it would dirty the house.

Another participant, Daisy, told how she was not allowed to socialize with others; even her visits to her own family were limited. Her request to learn sewing was also denied and she was told what type of clothing she could wear at home. Lily was manipulated into stopping her career. She was told to either stop work and look after the baby or leave the baby with her in-laws, a subtle way to make her be economically dependent.

Jasmine was allowed to work but she had to be home when she finished work. Her husband was the one who determined what she cooked and when she can cooked. The pattern of control that emerged from the interviews is consistent with research in the field of intimate partner violence. One further way the husbands of these women controlled them was by keeping them socially isolated.

**Social control.** It is common that the abuser would socially isolate the wife. They would try to cut them off from friends, family and/or colleagues. It is a typical form of coercive control. Daisy was not allowed to be out of the house without her husband or a member of her husband's family accompanying her. Her husband refused to let her visit her parents or for her parents to visit her. She was socially cut off from family and friends. She was to obey him in all things and she had no one with whom to share regarding her problems.

“That time [when] I stayed there, I had nobody, whom to tell my story to ... other people. Because [I] cannot go outside also. That time feel stressed you know.....I have to follow. He always says I am your husband, you have to follow what I say... If I don't follow, later he beat me lah”(Line 119-126/Daisy).

Another participant Lily, expressed how the husband was trying to control her socially. Though Lily's husband did not openly stop her from socializing with her friends or visiting her parents, he set terms and conditions as to when she could carry out these activities.

“He would insist that I should not go out with my friends on weekends. I cannot meet up with them after his working hours. I had to be home when he got home from work” (Line50-52/Lily2).

She had to be home when he was home from work or during the weekends. Besides he would criticize her friends and family, saying they were a bad influence. He would make negative comments about her family members on the pretext of protecting her.

“He would say my parents are not good. He would criticize my family a lot, and he would say “Oh I am just protecting you”. He would use that a lot, that I just protecting you. But it was quite controlling” (Line58-61/Lily).

Jasmine always had to be home when her husband was home and she was not allowed to go on outings with her friends or even attend company functions, though her husband allowed her to work. She felt that she lost her freedom after marriage.

“No freedom at all, he just [wanted] me to stay at home, do nothing also never mind, as long you are at home when he gets home” (Line 256-257/Jasmine).

There was no social life for her besides work and she was frustrated that she was not allowed to join in any sports activity - not with him when he played badminton with his friends not when the company organized any tournament.

For Jasmine, life during that time was confined to only home and work. Her husband limited her social activities.

Hibiscus was allowed to visit her parents or attend any family gathering but she often will have to make it back by certain time or faced a cold shoulder or sometime bashing from her husband. Such were the experience of control by the women in this study!

Besides controlling them, verbal abuse is another common tactic that the abusive husband used with the women. It is through the verbal abuse that these men minimize, intimidate and threaten the victim of the abuse.

**Verbal abuse.** Verbal abuse is a commonly used type of IPV. The abusers use words to demoralize, belittle and disgrace their victims. Degrading remarks, insults, public or private humiliation, and constant put downs were some of the abuse experience by the women in this study. Many of the abusers resorted to verbal abuse after finding out that others had come to know about the physical abuse.

There is an old English saying, “sticks and stone may break my bones” but words can really hurt. Although words do not physically hurt they may break a person’s spirit and cause a long lasting effect. Physical wounds may heal after sometime but the hurts caused by words may linger a long time. Even years after the separation, the abusive words may still remain in the mind. For example Jasmine recalled the degrading name such as prostitute and whore that the husband used to address her; it still sticks to her mind till today.

“All the bad words. All you know ‘*jalang, sundal*’ (whore, prostitute). This word, yes. That’s also one, one of the abuse in my life, is still in my mind all this word” (Line 454-455/Jasmine).

Not only did he call her that at home but over the phone as well and she felt she was just a sex object for him and also was just there to do the household chores instead of being loved and treated as a wife. Even though she tried not to think about it, there are times such words still appear in her mind to torment her, even after their divorce.

Another woman, Orchid, believed it was her training in the army that enabled her to sweep off her husband’s verbal abuse. Also because of her university education, her self-image has not been harmed by his hurtful name calling. She feels that she is more intelligent than the husband as she is more educated than him.

This is what Orchid commented:

“Yes, he scolds me with the words this and that, not only physical but thank God I am trained in the army before. You were trained in physical and psychological torture, whatever you say, masuk sini, keluar sini (one ear in, one ear out)..... I just do like that, he always call me stupid” (Line 305-310/Orchid).

Besides physically abusing her and betraying her by having extra-marital affairs, Rose’s husband also taunted her constantly. It was as if to degrade Rose’s professionalism as she is a lawyer herself and she should know that she was not named in the house title, hence she had no right to the house, though she may be the one maintaining it.

“Sometimes the words that he uttered are very abusive you know. Is very disturbing, very hurt in that sense. In those day, I stayed in the house belongs to him, I don’t have any name. I myself is a lawyer, the house that I am staying, I upkeep the house but I don’t have a name in that house you know” (Line 295-298/Rose).

He not only said it once but often enough for Rose’s daughter who was only eight then, to remind Rose of what the father had said about the mother not having a name in the house title after one of the explosive moments she had with her husband.

Lily’s husband would just lash out at her whenever he is in one of his dark moods. Carnation’s husband would use four letter words on her and Jasmine’s husband would yell and scold her whenever she did not please him. But he was never pleased with what she did. Hibiscus’s husband was always complaining about things that she did wrong, there were never any compliments from him.

With all the abuses experienced by these women and the sudden explosions or beatings that could happen at any moment, it is no wonder that they were often afraid.

**Fear.** The home should be a safe heaven, a place to shelter from the storms in the world outside. It should be a place we love going back to. But for some home is a place of fear and not peace, they never know when they will be subjected to abuse. They may be constantly worried about safety, not only that of their own but also that of their children. They have to constantly be on the

lookout for potential explosions of the violence. So the feeling of fear is common among women experiencing intimate partner violence.

This is what one of the participants who had already left the abuser for four years said about fear:

“I think fear, anxiety. So I think until now I struggle with hyper-vigilance. That I am still creeping [around] and thinking I wonder what’s going to happen next; what is going to go wrong now. Because of so many years of living like that, I think I still tend to live in that kind of mode. So it’s something I still try ... [am] learning to let go of” (Line 294-297/Lily).

The fear in Lily’s life was quite real as she never knew what would happen to her next. She described herself as living in fear and constantly walking on eggshells. Even years after she has left him, she still tends to live in a hyper-vigilance mode.

This sense of insecurity in one’s home is typical of the experience of an abused woman..

Another participant Rose, commented that the mood in the house changed whenever her husband came home.

Both she and her children were living in fear. It felt like living in a war zone where a bomb might explode anytime.

“And in fact every now and then when my children knew that he was coming back [home], my children [would] worry that anytime the bomb shell would be there ... there will be an explosion [with] quarrelling, fighting. Actually, my children lived in fear, actually in fear before I walked out” (Line 162-165/Rose)

She even went on to say that it felt as if the devil is back whenever the husband comes home.

“Whenever he comes home, the moment he comes back, he opens the gate, I feel very disturbed, my children feel very fearful. Is like the devil is back” (Line 314-316/Rose).

The statement shows the extent of fear being created in the presence of an abusive spouse.

Usually we have a picture that home is a place to relax, a place where we could be free to be who we are but this was not the case for Hibiscus. She lamented that there was tension at home all the time.

“There is always tension at the home. The tension is very terrible that is why whenever I go to visit my mother, I feel like relief, relief (laugh with tears flowing down) (Line 313-315/Hibiscus).

It made her felt very squeezed in such a relationship. She did not have the sense of being part of the family. She was just there to do the chores and the marital relationship was not a fulfilling one for her.

The women’s husbands in this study did not apologize nor admit the wrong doing of their abusive behavior. Some men felt bad about their behavior and consistently blamed their wives for what happened. None of the women indicated that their husbands took any responsibility for the violence towards them. Only Carnation attributed her husband’s abusive behavior to drinking - for other participants this was not an issue.



All the women in this study were survivors in their own right as they all had found ways to cope with the abuse. From the women's perspective, acquiescence was a tactic for survival. One of the women, Orchid, resorted to silence as she realized that was the way to avoid getting hit by her husband and she was glad that her army training enabled her to keep cool while under torture.

“Until one stage, I stayed there, I didn't want to talk with him. If we talk, we will quarrel. If we quarrel, most likely I'll get blue-black. So I just play smart, do what you want to do, when the time comes, I will walk out of this house and it will be for good” (Line 191-194, Orchid).

She bore with him for the time being all the while planning her exit. With her army training she was able to endure not only the physical abuse, but also learnt to ignore the hurting words. She acted bravely in front of her husband and did not cry in front of him. She kept the tears to herself. She found that her bravery actually made him angry as he could not make her cry. She called that her defense mechanism.

Overall, the women's experiences of violence did not appear to be radically different from the experiences of women in the West. Any remarks on this topic must be considered observations more than conclusions, because there was no control group for comparison. This group differed from most studies of battered women in the West in a few ways other than being a Malaysian sample. The women in this study were not from the low income group, and were less likely to be recruited into the project via their contact with the shelter home.

Several preliminary comments can be made though. All seven women indicated that they were controlled by their abuser in one way or another. Some were socially isolated (cut off from friends, family, neighbors and/or colleagues). Social isolation is typical of the coercive control exercised by the abuser in the West as well. Several characteristics of Asian culture did make it easier for abusers to isolate their victims in the Malaysian setting where the idea of keeping an ideal marriage and not losing face is considered important. While battered women everywhere are underserving of the abuse, Malaysian women have less access to services than women in the West. Fewer services are available and women have virtually no clear path to seek help.

### **Turning Point**

Despite the many barriers and obstacles to leaving, all seven women interviewed had permanently left the abusive relationship. What made them take action? What was different about the circumstances that convinced them to leave permanently?

Although these women reported many events which were meaningful to them in helping them to realize that this was not the type of life they wanted, each woman was able to identify a “final straw” or turning point that switched them completely away from their previous pattern of existence and thus made them decide to leave the abusive relationship. This turning point was characterized by a specific event and/or was the culmination of a personal process of coming to realize that leaving was really the only option.

Kearney (2001) stated that this turning point can be subtle or sudden and went on to list a number of factors that led to the change. The factors given by Kearney include deliberate intervention from the outside; inadvertent exposure of the abuse, leading to reframing of the situation in new light; an act by the partner so egregious that its wrongness became undeniable; an internal accumulation of hurt and disillusionment that finally outweighed the hope of improvement in the relationship; or an increase in the sense of self-worth because of outside experiences that made independence seem possible.

The participants' experiences in this study echoed Kearney's findings. Four of the women considered a specific event and its impact on them as a clear turning point in the process that led them to the decision of leaving. For others the turning point came after a process of realization and re-evaluation. For example, in Orchid's case, following previous attempts to leave, she realized after returning that her husband was not going to change. In this case, her time apart helped her to see things as they really were.

Each of these turning points was experienced as great suffering. It took great strength and resilience for each of these women to abandon their familiar ways of living to venture into the unknown. But once their decision was made, there was no turning back. It was as if a light bulb had been turned on in the dark. They found the switch and were surrounded with the light of a new awareness, a new realization that they could make a new beginning for themselves.

The decision to leave came about when the women gave up hope in the relationship and became aware of the choices open to them. The insights gained through exposure helped them to realize that they did not deserve to be abused. For Lily, this insight came after input from a psychologist in the U. S., and from friends in the United States and Australia. They told her that it was more traumatizing for her son to watch her being abused by her husband than it was for him to experience his parents' divorce. This awareness and fear for her personal safety acted as the catalyst for her to leave.

In Rose's case, it was her husband's cold-hearted response when her brother confronted him for physically abusing Rose. He coldly said that if he really wanted to hurt her, he could easily kill her as he was a karate black belt. It seemed to imply what Rose experienced was just a small thing that did not warrant any notice. Rose realized that he was not at all sorry for what he had done. So that was the day Rose left and never returned.

Daisy had been a victim of violence for eight years. However, the unique aspect of the incident she identified as the turning point did not necessarily connect to the abuse but to the choice her husband had made regarding keeping his girlfriend. Daisy described the husband's heartless announcement of his desire to go with his girlfriend rather than be faithful to her as the turning point. The cruel announcement broke her heart and she finally told her parents of her situation. They urged and supported her decision to leave.

For Carnation, the final straw that caused her to leave was when her husband broke his promise to attend her sister's wedding with her in Singapore. Despite the fact that Carnation told him she would be happy to go Nepal with him if he could not change the date of departure, he quietly booked the ticket and went alone without her not revealing his plans until the day of departure.

Hibiscus remained in the abusive relationship although her husband had challenged her to leave. The turning point came after she chose against her husband's wishes to stay overnight with her son at her mother's house. Upon returning home and seeing on the porch the bag her husband had packed with all her son's belongings, she left for good with her son after she was given a final beating by her husband.

The final straw for Jasmine came when her husband went to her workplace and shouted at her supervisor for calling her at midnight to enquire about a customer's bill. She was so embarrassed and had had enough of his controlling and abusive ways that she actually asked him to leave as they were then staying with her parents.

For the majority of women in this study, the first time they left was also their final time. Orchid was the only exception. She had left and returned before making the final exit. She gave him another chance hoping that he had changed as indicated by his good behavior over an extended period when she went to stay with her parents. He visited her and the son faithfully every weekend for a year and was behaving himself during that time. Orchid gave him another chance and went back with him for a second time only to find there had been no real change.

The cumulative daily torture caused Orchid to fear for her personal safety. She commented to her mother-in-law that if she stayed on with her husband, either she or her husband would one day be killed. She gave up hope of him ever changing, so she left for good.

Participants through exposure external to their situation gained insight and saw that abuse was not a normal way of life. They realized the negative effects the abuse was having on them and their children. Four of the women in this study realized that the husband was not going to change despite the many opportunities or promises given. Three became more aware of the choices before them through their exposure at work.

With this insight and awareness, a pivotal experience in the abusive relationship caused the women to finally say “enough is enough” leading them to make plans to leave. For one woman, it was her husband’s extramarital affair that served as the straw that broke the camel’s back. For the others, it was the hopelessness of the situation and also seeing themselves going downhill. Having lost hope in the relationship and realizing that the abusive partner was not ever going to change was a major factor in coming to the decision to leave.

## **Losing Hope in the Relationship**

All seven women had invested considerable effort in making the marriage succeed. The women felt compelled to justify their efforts and to continue trying to save the relationship, believing that if they tried harder to stop the violence they would succeed. However, as in most violent relationships, these efforts failed and the violence persisted. It was only when the women realized that it was not going to work that the thought of leaving began to grow.

Lily had given up on the relationship after all her efforts at reconciliation. They went for couple counseling yet the husband would not admit to any wrong on his part. That was when Lily realized that her husband was not going to change his ways:

“And I made a genuine effort to reconcile but the truth is [that], after a while, he went back to his old ways. So then, I knew that counseling or not, he is not going to change .... I knew that that was it lah, he is not going to change. Counseling was making no progress, he didn’t want to admit anything wrong” (Line 212-218, Lily).

Lily’s desire to make the relationship work was expressed by the phrase “I genuinely wanted to make it work/ I made a genuine effort” repeated many times during the interview. However, her efforts were in vain. Though there were some changes they were short-lived and after a while her husband refused to admit that there was anything wrong with the relationship. That was when Lily gave up on trying as she realized that it is going nowhere.

Rose's realization came in the form of shock that her husband would beat her to the extent that he even told her brother that he could easily kill Rose as he was a karate black belt. The icy complacency of his voice terrified her and caused her to give up hope for her relationship.

“All the physical bruises and that ... I mean a man can beat you to such an extent, knowing that she is your wife, borne two children for him. Why is that he can beat you? So I didn't ... treat him as a husband...” (Line 134-137/Rose).

It came as a shock for Rose that the man who slept beside her would beat her so badly. Rose was the one who was not afraid to let others know that she had been abused. She informed her sister on the night that she was badly beaten up.

Though she knew what to do as a legal professional, she was saddened by the fact that the husband never showed any sign of remorse for what he had done. He did not turn up to assist her or show any concern after that.

Orchid realized that if she continued to stay on in the abusive relationship, either she or the husband would be killed. She had given him a few chances, the first time was after he threatened her with a *parang* (large jungle knife) while she was three months pregnant. The second chance was after she moved to her parents' house in Kuantan after the birth of their son. The husband went to visit her and her son regularly for a year. She thought that after the year of travelling, he might have changed but when she moved back to stay with him again, he did not stop his abusive ways. At last Orchid realized that he was not going to change,



She feared that one day when she could not take it anymore she might end up killing her husband or when she fought back, she might be the one to be killed; so she chose to walk out of the abusive relationship. This is how she phrased it:

“it’s a matter of time ... when the time will come when one day I [will] be killed. It’s a matter of he die or I die. He dies, when I cannot control my anger anymore, most probably he will die. Most probably I will die when I fight back. So either one ... so I walk out” (Line 372-375/ Orchid).

So she decided that it was better to walk out than to remain in such an abusive relationship.

Another participant Carnation described a series of events that caused her to lose hope. She shared with sadness how her husband was indifferent to her and she came to the realization that her husband was totally not bothered about her. He did not attend any function with her, and was not present at the delivery of their first baby and even hit her during her confinement. Although her life was not in danger, the fact that the husband did not bother about her or the child, and would beat her even while she had the child in her arms, caused her to give up on the relationship. She did not see the need for such a husband in her life

“There was another time, I was breast feeding her and he came [and] hit [me] on my head so hard and I nearly ... she nearly fell lah, because of the pain ar ... luckily he managed to hold her. Then in between, things like that have been going on. And whole day, I am alone in the house. He ... not even one day, from the day she was born and to the day I left ... that he actually stayed at home at night to help me take care of her. Not even one day. The whole night he is out” (Line 153-159/ Carnation).

Carnation was disheartened by her husband's disregard for her and her baby. She felt lonely all day as it was only her and the baby at home. No one is helping her to care for the baby. The husband was out all night.

Carnation had been handling things at home all by herself for some time and because she was a graduate, she believed she would be able to support herself and did not need to be financially dependent on him. She did not want to go on tolerating the things he did to her. nor all his nonsense such as clubbing till late night, coming home drunk and hitting her.,

Carnation's own childhood experiences influenced her in leaving as she saw the history of her father repeating with her husband. She did not think he was going to change and believed that once he had started to lay hands on her, the habit would not change. She decided to give up on the relationship. Such insights lead women to decide to permanently exit an abusive relationship.

### **Gaining Insight**

It was not easy for these women to realize that they were in an abusive relationship and to see that their situation was not normal. The insight that one deserved a better life; or a growing awareness of the effects of abuse on themselves and their children contributed to the decision to leave. Such insights arose either from contradictions between what they knew and what their husbands told them, or through input from work colleagues or friends. .

One woman described how upon reflection on her life as a single and then as a married person, she realized that she was happier as a single woman. It dawned on Orchid that she wanted to be treated with respect and not abused. She realized that she deserved a better life as her mother did not give birth to her to go through such suffering. She knew that she did not deserve to be abused.

“No, I say to myself, I don’t deserve to be treated like this. I deserve a better life than this. Even when I was single, I was happy. I deserved happiness in life. I told him ... my mother gave birth to me, almost sacrificed her life for me to be happy in this world, not to be treated [like this] by someone like you.” (Line 215-218/Orchid).

When she compared and contrasted her life as a single and as a married woman, Orchid realized that she would be much happier being single. So she made up her mind to be a single mother rather than remain in the abusive relationship. Many times during the interview process she mentioned the phrase “I don’t deserve to be treated like this”, she was keenly aware no one should be subject to such an abusive lifestyle. This insight caused her to begin planning for her exit.

One participant, Lily had stayed on in the violent relationship with the intention of giving her son a complete family. It was advice from professionals and friends, that she needed not continue to live in an abusive relationship as it was not good for her as well as her son, that influenced her decision and served as a turning point for her:

“Actually it helped that I had input from a psychologist in the United States. He told me, and my friends in the United States and Australia told me, that XX is more traumatized by watching his father abuse me repeatedly ... and that it would be less traumatic in making one break and walk out then. Because there is one break, we [could] move on with our live instead of every time the abuse happens, you try to get over it and then [it]

happens again and again [so] that you can't get out. And it is the same for the kid. So that [was] actually the key point for me, the turning point, when I realized this" (Line 103-110/Lily).

Only when the reality set in for her, when she saw that it was more traumatizing for her son to constantly witness his father's abuse of her and when she realized that her own mental health going downhill that she began to seriously to plan her exit.

Another participant, Jasmine, spoke of how exposure at work helped to shift her perceptions. Working in a hotel and meeting people from different walks of life and from different parts of the world, Jasmine began to question her own life:

"I get married like three years, about three years and... I started to see things when I worked in a hotel. I mixed with people, I see [a] different life, I see people, I saw people travel, they do the things they want and I can't do what I want" (Line 21-23/Jasmine).

This realization only set in after three years of marriage when working in a hotel. She began to ask why other people could do the things they liked in life, but she could not. Jasmine did not ask for the luxuries in life. All she wanted was to be able to take control of her own life. She knew in her heart that she did not want to be treated like a doll (or sex toy). She wanted to be treated with respect and have a life of her own, not one controlled by others. These thoughts had begun to take root before the incident that led her to chase her husband out of her parents' house. This was after he totally embarrassed her at work by scolding her supervisor for calling her late one night to clarify an unsettled bill.

“He called me because there is one bill hanging. [My supervisor] just wanted to ask [me about] that. And he [her husband] gets mad, drives, drives down to the hotel and meets these people ... with [the] guy in the restaurant you know ... is, is very embarrassing ... and shouts at him. ... and from that day ... the next day I went to work, everybody talked about me, you know, very embarrassing and I have [had] enough of you. Please move out from my mum’s house, just go away from my mum’s house” (Line 160-170/Jasmine).

Marriage for Hibiscus had not been a life of wedded bliss. After her son had grown up he came to realize that she had nothing to look forward to in her marriage. Further there was nothing to hold her back from making a clean break from her abusive husband. She was ready and more than happy to leave.

Another factor that caused the women to finally decide to leave was their husbands’ extra-marital affairs. Two of the women, when their husbands refused to stop seeing the women they were involved with, decided to quit the marriage.

Daisy had endured the physical abuse by her husband because she said she was the one who had chosen her husband. The turning point for her was her discovery of her husband’s extra-marital affair. She tolerated the abuse but not the extra-marital affair.

“Okay, my husband calls me, tells me what you know. Okay okay you take care of kids, I have to follow my girlfriend. All make my heart very pained, very pained. I cannot *tahan* (bear) [it] with my father-in-law, mother-in-law also causing [me] pain, heart pain. My husband also does this to me. So I make the decision, there is no point staying here. I called my parents and asked my parents to come down” (Line 261-265/Daisy).

The choice made by Daisy's husband caused her to be heartbroken. She saw no point in staying on after she had endured all that pain. When she found the pain too much to bear, she finally confided in her mother regarding her husband's affair. With her mother's encouragement, she made the decision to leave.

Rose also left because of her husband's extra-marital affairs. Rose said it was a mental torture when every night, late into the night, her husband was still not home and she was unable to contact him. She wondered where he was. She described the mental torture that she went through:

“It is very [much] mental torture. Every now and then [when] he comes back, you realize that the T-shirt, the pants, everything is full of a perfume smell that is not him. Is from the women, is from the GRO (prostitutes), from the China dolls, the karaoke women ... and even the intimate part is stinks with perfume. I feel hurt. I feel cold and feel hurt. You feel suddenly your heart is dropping. He had this intimate relationship with this other woman. You know that he has been doing this with other girls, intimate things. It hurt a lot” (Line 74-80/ Rose).

She felt very disturbed and hurt that the husband was having intimate relationships with other women. She also was afraid that the husband might pass on a sexually transmitted disease to her, so she withdrew herself sexually from her husband. Finally, it was the beating and her husband's heartless responses that led Rose to realize that it was time for her to leave and she did exactly that.

Thus, it was a combination of a series of events that lead to a loss of hope in the relationship, insights gained through the exposure to external inputs and individuals' reflections on the abuses that persuaded the women to decide to permanently exit the relationship.

### **Permanent Exit**

Many people believe that abused women choose to remain in an abusive relationship. To stay or to leave is an issue that these women constantly struggle with - which is better? It was not easy for these women as they contemplated leaving the abusive relationship. The reasons women stay in abusive relationships are the same as those for which we stay in any unhappy relationship. Our culture and religion have taught us to believe in the sacredness of marriage and to assume responsibility when things do not go well in the relationship. We believe that children must be raised in an “intact” or two-parent family, which is the ideal for a happy family. Initially, the women also tended to be more optimistic believing that their love or sacrifices could change things around. They hoped that things would improve with time. It was only when they gave up hope that they would contemplate leaving.

On the negative side, they often stayed in the relationship because they felt they had no place to go, especially if they had children. Many women remain financially dependent upon men. Three out of the seven women in this study were not working after having children. Daisy stopped work right after her wedding. Other factors such as children, societal norms concerning marriage, religious affiliations and attachment to the abuser all came into play when they thought about leaving. There is indeed a whole wide range of factors affecting a woman's decision to stay or leave. Having said that, the participants in this study demonstrated that women do leave despite all the obstacles or challenges they face in leaving. But the act of leaving has to be according to the woman's own

timing and readiness. This finding is consistent with that of Davis's (2002) investigation of the leaving experience of seventeen abused women. Timing is a major theme that emerged from that study. Therefore, women's decision to leave can be characterized best as a process whereby, through time, and in the presence of a combination of factors, women come to believe they have little choice but to abandon the abusive relationship.

While much of the literature argues that women tend to leave and come back, the women in this study typically left only once and did not subsequently return. Orchid who left and returned two times before her final exit was the exception.

Interviews with the women in this study indicate, however, that the decision to leave is not just the result of a number of factors working independently to influence women's decision making. Rather, the women went through a complicated process of deciding to permanently end the relationship within the context of their changing perceptions, experiences and life conditions and circumstances. Certain factors were taken into account when thinking of permanently exiting the abusive relationship.



### **Factors Affecting Leaving**

Factors affecting the decision to leave include the resources available both in term of financial and spiritual; the support given whether formal or informal; the presence or otherwise of children; one's religion and beliefs as well as the planning involved in leaving. Of course there are also some obstacles that stand in the way such as the negative responses of religious leaders as well as the initial objections of family members.

These factors are distinguished from the process of re-evaluating the relationship in that they do not prompt a change in women's perception of violence or persuade the women to leave; they simply facilitate women's leaving. Not all the factors pertained to the situation of any one individual, rather each woman had one or more influencing her decision to leave.

### **Resources**

In order to leave, women need to have the necessary resources to enable them to do so. They must be able to take care of themselves and their children. . Other studies also affirm that financial security is instrumental in the leaving process (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Gharaibeh & Oweis, 2009; Kim & Gray, 2008; LaViolette & Barnett, 2000). However, not only are material resources necessary, emotional and spiritual resources that give strength and assurance that they are doing the right thing can be just as important. All the women in this study mentioned that they at one time or other had prayed and relied on scripture to get them through.

**Financial.** One of the main reasons abused women do not leave is economic dependency. Without the necessary financial resources they will be unable to provide for themselves and their children. Of all the participants Lily expressed most concern in this regard as she had a child with special needs, thus needing more financial support for his education. Her son's special needs also prevented her from working at that time. Moreover, she was the only participant whose family members were not initially supportive of her leaving. The other participants were well supported by family members in their decision to leave the abusive relationship. Some worked throughout their married life and thus were financially independent. For those who were not working such as Daisy and Carnation, they were confident in their own ability to obtain a job and were to do so shortly after leaving.

When contemplating leaving, financial issues weighed heavily on Lily.

“Then it was difficult because I was not financially independent” (Line 21/Lily).

She also was afraid of losing custody of her child and she was concerned that she did not have a safe place to go to.

“When I thought of leaving, the obstacles were so great. I was not financially independent. I had no way of supporting the boy. I have nowhere to go and there is always the thought that they will snatch the boy away from me....I still have no income of my own. So I knew I [was] still at his mercy financially. So again, I have no means to leave” (Line 148-151/Lily).

The phrase “I have no means to leave” tells of her sense of despair in being unable to leave due to the obstacles she faced. She repeated this statement many times during the interview.

Another participant, Rose, mentioned that her concern was for the maintenance of herself and her children. It was not that she was dependent on the husband financially for she was working and as a legal professional. She simply wanted to get what she was legally entitled to, as her husband was from a rich family. At least with maintenance she would not need to worry financially. So she invoked the law to get her husband to pay maintenance for her and the children.

“This particular law states that the husband must maintain the children. So I invoked this particular law, claimed for my children, and for payment of a domestic helper. Because at that point in time, I find that [thought of] divorce [is] already in my mind but I need more evidence to secure the custody of my children. Okay, once I have maintenance for my children, at least financially I don’t have to worry about it” (Line 188-192/Rose).

As a legal professional, she knew how to get the law to work for her thus ensuring her financial security.

**Spiritual.** Another major resource that saw the women through in the process of contemplating leaving and then sustaining their decision to leave is spiritual in nature. All the participants talked about their relationship with God. They felt empowered through prayer. They talked about how prayer strengthened them and helped see them through their experiences of abuse and deciding to leave. As evidenced here, many of the women relied on religious practice such as prayer and Bible reading to sustain. A number of the participants continued to rely on their faith and religion to maintain the decision to leave the abusive

relationship and to file for divorce. Many have found that prayer and Bible study helped to keep them sane and gave them strength and direction in the path they were to take. Furthermore, even when they utilized other resources to leave the relationship - such as family support, friends and the legal system - many participants still placed their faith in God, as shown by the experiences of these women.

Rose found that not only her faith in God sustained her, but also her church members were very empathetic concerning her circumstances. They did not condemn her decision to seek a divorce. They prayed for her every Sunday:

“I would say you know my church members, every Sunday they pray for me. My secret is no secret you know. I go to church I tell everybody, I need your prayer. . I don’t keep it as a secret so I tell everybody I have this problem. I am going through this case. And every time I have court case and court hearing, I ask them please pray for me. Please announce and pray for me” (Line 808-813/ Rose).

Besides God as her pillar of support, she found comfort in the Bible. She believes God is watching over all. And her church members were supporting her through the ordeal via prayer.

Another participant, Carnation, feels that it is the little prayers that she makes regularly that strengthens her:

“God, ya it’s God...Yes, it’s the small prayer that you do and from there you actually get the strength lah ... I feel” (Line 470-471/Carnation)

She believes that one may struggle for a little while after leaving, but then things will be better.

Though Lily was disillusioned by the reactions of some of the church leaders she first confided in about the abuse, she maintained her faith and continued to rely on God for her sanity. It was through Bible reading that she maintained her hope and assurance of God's care for her. Despite what the church members said, she was convinced that God does not condemn her and this meant a lot to her. She is comforted by the fact that God hates violence even though her church essentially condoned it. She felt reassured that her decision to leave her abusive husband was the right one.

Hibiscus also looked to God for strength and assurance that her situation will change:

“God, it was God and praying that things will come about, that gives me strength” (Line 380/Hibiscus).

Her faith in God was also a great help for Orchid as she sensed God's help all the way.

Even though at the time when she first left, she only had enough money to pay the deposit and rent for her accommodation, she believed God would help her. She was determined that she was not going back to her abusive husband no matter what.

Though a Muslim, Jasmine says she does not pray as a Muslim but believes there is a God out there who will help her:

“I believe there is one God ... every time is like praying but I don’t know to whom I pray, because I not pray as a Muslim. I just close my eyes and say God if you still love me just show me the right way, where to go, I just want to be happy. That, that’s what I always do” (Line 384-388/Jasmine).

She prays for God to show her the right way.

Besides the availability and access to the resources that enable the women to leave, support is also important for a permanent ending. Other than relying on spirituality, many of the women also turn to family and friends to support them through their experiences of abuse and leaving.

## **Support**

Financial security allows a woman to be independent and not worried about where the next meal will come from. However, as human beings a common need is to have social contact and the ongoing support of others, especially through times of need. Women do leave abusive relationships but they do not do it alone. They rely on many sources of help. Though they had different experiences, survivors in this study were able to leave and stay out primarily because other people such as family and friends provided them with financial, emotional and moral support. The majority (six of seven) received good support from their families, except Lily whose support was mainly initially from friends till her family eventually came around. The participants received help in many different ways including financial support, moral support, help with child care,

accommodation as well as others acting as a sounding board to discuss issues pertaining to their leaving.

**Family.** Support, be it formal or informal, from family or friends, is crucial in helping the women through the critical period of leaving the abusive relationship. All of the participants in this study involved someone in their family or social network in their decision to leave. Most of them indicated that they had involved at least one member of their families of origin, usually their mother. However, two of the women also shared their decision with their mothers-in-law, in addition to their own family.

The reactions of members of the family of origin to the women's decision to leave ranged from emotional support and significant instrumental assistance to criticism. All of the women except Lily reported that their families of origin supported their decision to leave and helped them in various ways and to varying extents.

In general, it appears that at the stage when the woman decides to terminate the relationship she perceives it as natural, appropriate and necessary even to turn to her family. Many went to stay with their parents while some quietly moved out and found jobs away from the town where the abusers lived in. Many of the women's parents played a significant role in helping them to leave successfully. They not only sheltered them but also supported them financially and assisted them with child care while they worked.

This is what Carnation said when she could not tolerate it anymore, she just packed her bag and left to stay with her mother.

“I cannot tolerate all this nonsense already and one day, I just called my mother and told her that I had left. I am coming back. Ya, my mother didn’t say anything, she is supporting me actually. She is supporting me” (Line 217-219/Carnation).

Not only her mother, but her brother was also supportive of her decision to leave the abusive relationship; they encouraged her not to bother about others’ comments.

The supportive words of family members meant a great deal to Carnation giving her courage. Not only the immediate family but the community around can make a difference, depending how people treat or respond to a woman who decides to walk out of a violent relationship. Just as Hibiscus’ experience illustrates, it was her mother and a supportive community that lived around her that saw her through her leaving period and sustained her in her decision to leave.

“So it was things like mother and the community where we live. This neighborhood is not a neighborhood where we don’t know one another. We live in a community where we know quite a good number of people with weekly meetings ... like that ... cell group and when they saw me at my mum’s place for a while. Of course they got curious, my mum told them and they had no problem with it. They were very supportive and there were no hard goings, nothing drastic that says “hey, you did bad, you did a wrong thing”. Everything was very smooth and is like why I didn’t get out much earlier” (Line 345-352/Hibiscus).

The support of her mother and the community and the fact they did not condemn her actually caused Hibiscus to regret not leaving any earlier!



Daisy's family was her strong support. Not only did her parents support her financially, her siblings also helped her financially when she needed it. Even though she is not from a wealthy family, her family is a close knit one. Daisy did her best to provide for her children after leaving. She straight away got herself a job even though she had not worked in paid employment for the eight years of her marriage. Though her pay was very low, her parents and siblings were all willing to chip in and support her whenever necessary. And her mother and sister helped with child care while she works.

Jasmine's family also fully supported her decision to leave. She is thankful to have parents who helped her practically with child care:

"My family is a very good support. Now, like my son ah ... he lives with my mum because I have two more brothers who are same age 14 and 15. The three of them [are] good friends. So, my dad takes them to school, all together... And my mum didn't even ask, I mean she says I'll look after your son, you just work. I have my own house, you have to come once a week to see him. As long I'm there for him, my mum says I don't mind to look after him" (Line 347-353/ Jasmine).

Jasmine's parents were supportive of her decision and were willing to help her by taking care of her son. That freed her to work and she visits her son once a week. She is not concerned financially as her brother is willing to back her up anytime.

In the process of leaving and eventually divorcing their husbands, most women received assistance from their families. For some this included acceptance, understanding and accompanying them as needed, while others required basic help such as financial assistance, shelter and child care while they worked. For example, Carnation, Jasmine and Daisy mentioned that their mothers helped with

caring for their children while they worked. Other than family, friends also play an important role in these women's lives in helping them to affirm their decision to leave and also to rebuild their lives after leaving.

**Friends.** Several of the women had established social networks separate from their partner from which they gained a sense of competence, saw models of alternative, healthy relationships and, in Lily's case, received concrete assistance enabling her to leave. The benefits derived from this separate social sphere may have led them to a greater faith in their ability to survive independently of their abuser. They received support from their separate network of acquaintances and friends for coping with and eventually leaving the abusive relationship.

Even though her family initially did not support her leaving, Lily found great support from her friends and eventually her family came around and supported her. This was what Lily had to say about friends who supported her leaving:

"Friends, friends who understand me, ah, who supported me. And actually my friends went very far, especially my friends who are overseas. Ah my friend in America sent me money and she constantly supported me. She would call me up and say you have come a million miles and was just really encouraging. Ah ... and she was really there. My friends in Australia were really amazing, one of them gave me a place to stay. We stayed with her for quite a long time. In fact she said stay as long as you want to, but her mother came and her mother couldn't stand xxx so we had to leave. It became quite volatile. Her mother is a very fierce lady so we had to go but [my friend was] there all along. And in fact my family gave so little support, I think, she in a way, we grew out in same school, she is like a big sister so she took on the role. She took on the role of being a family to me and she has been ever since" (Line 502-513/Lily).

Not only did they provide for her physically, they also encouraged her emotionally and gave her moral support, telling her that she had come a long way. It was her friends' moral support and practical help that made it possible for her to stand firm behind her decision. These friends were like a family to her.

They took care of her physical needs such as housing and household items and cheered her on along the way. It was clear that her friends' support sustained her in maintaining her decision to leave. And eventually her family also came around to accept her decision to leave:

“But I think the friends that have stuck by me as family and eventually my family have come around and became very supportive and they have learned to accept it. We just don't talk about going back. They have learnt to accept me” (Line 561-563/Lily).

The acceptance of her friends and family in respecting her decision to leave was also important in enabling her to hold on to her decision to move on in her life. It was her friends who stood by and sustained her through the initial years of leaving.

Sometimes, when women walk out of an abusive relationship, they need some words of affirmation to let them know that they are not being selfish and leaving can be a right thing to do. Rose commented that many of her friends affirmed her decision to walk out of the abusive relationship:

“Finally when I walked out, I thanked God. God sent me all my friends, all good friends. I have so many, assuring me saying you are doing the right [thing], I know you are doing the right thing. Everybody is telling me you are doing the right thing and everybody is saying that you are very strong” (Line 352-355/Rose).

All these reassuring words from friends give her the confidence that she was doing the right thing. And her inner voice confirmed that her decision was the correct one. Though she still had to go through the ordeal of all the necessary procedures involved in pressing charges against her husband for the physical abuse - attending to police inquiries and court cases - Rose left her husband with an anticipation of something good being ahead of her.

Friends also played an important role in Hibiscus' life when she left. They came into her life and helped her rebuild her life. None of the people in Hibiscus' circle instilled any guilt in her for deciding to leave the violent relationship. In fact, they were sympathetic, encouraged her and helped to rebuild her confidence.

With the support of family and friends, these women were able to leave the abusive relationship for good. But before the permanent exit, the women had already done some sort of planning towards their final departure.

## **Planning**

Women's final exit from their abusive relationship is more aptly characterized by a series of decisions made over time, over a period of weeks, months or even years. Planning is an essential part of leaving. Though all of the women did some sort of planning, they varied greatly in the amount of advance planning that went into their final departure and how many of their belongings they were able to take with them

All the women I interviewed had done some kind of planning even though the final decision for some, for example Daisy and Hibiscus, was made very quickly. Some of the women described years of methodical planning and strategizing to leave their abusive partners. Long term planning included getting a better qualification or buying property. Orchid described how she painstakingly arranged for the mailing address of all her important mail, such as banking, telephone bill and income tax, to be changed from her marital home to her parents' home so that when she leave she would not have to go back to her marital home for anything. Letting the in-laws see what was happening was a significant element in the planning process. For others, due to the circumstances, the exit was hurriedly forced on them. Nonetheless, prior planning facilitated their exits.

Orchid, who made lengthy and methodical plans, spoke of her thought processes while contemplating leaving an abusive relationship. She actually left the relationship twice before the final exit. Orchid saw no future with her husband after six months of being married to him. His was being abusive two months into her marriage. Her first step in planning was to upgrade her education so that she would be more employable and be able to be financially independent. It was only six months into her marriage that Orchid began to plan:

“After six months married, I enrolled in a degree program. I say I want [to do this] because I didn't see any future with him ... so I say I have to depend on myself. I can't depend on him, I must [go] back [to study]. That time I already had my microbiology [qualifications]. I worked in a pharmacy Now I say since I am doing sales, I am going to do BBA marketing degree. So enrolled part-time. Saturday and Sunday I went for my degree” (Line 93-97/ Orchid).

She realized in the early stages of her marriage that she needed to plan for her own future. She enrolled herself in a degree course and spent her weekends studying. Besides planning for her future, she also filed a police report reporting the abuse:

“You have to make a police report otherwise you will have nowhere to start. You have to make ... If you don’t make [one], you are not starting from anywhere, you’ve got to make [one]. But making police report [is] one of the hassle problems which sometimes don’t bring you anywhere also. But at least you have the evidence. I made the report, compiled them over the years ... like this already (gesture the thickness). Even for the medical report I have to go to the hospital to buy the medical report, to get back this and that. So that I knew if I were to file for divorce in the court, these are all the evidence. You know I just keep it”  
(Line 675-683/Orchid)

For Orchid, making police reports and keeping copies of medical reports would serve as court evidence in the future though it did not help to end the abuse then and there. She did not just dream about a good life, she prepared and planned for her own future. She thought through the timing, and what she needed to prepare. She talked about how she had all her important correspondence diverted a few weeks before she left the marital home. She did not want to have any reason to return to the marital home after she left so she planned ahead.

On her second exit, she moved back to her parents. She was not afraid to tell the husband subtly about her intention to leave, but her husband took no notice of her so-called “threat”. This time Orchid not only changed her correspondence address but also her workplace and study location. She totally uprooted herself from the Klang Valley and moved back to stay with her parents. And she had this all planned out months ahead.

Rose not only prepared herself but also her children for the imminent departure. She went house hunting way before she left the marital home. She wanted a place she and her children could call home and find peace in the home. She wanted to let her children know well ahead of time that one day they would be moving out of the marital home without the father.

“Then I warned my children, I myself prepared and I wanted my children to prepare. We will be moving out one fine day” (Line 327-328/Rose).

Emotionally, she prepared herself by withdrawing from him sexually:

“First, I withdrew from my sexual relationship with him. When a woman withdraws [from a ] sexual relationship ... with the spouse, actually, I would say you are 80% prepared for divorce already” (Line 715-717/Rose).

Maybe due to her profession as a legal professional, she not only filed a police report about the abuse, she also pressed charges against her husband for physically violating her. She even got the mass media to publicize her case as a strategy to get at her ex-husband for abusing her.

Since her husband’s family is rich and they are afraid of the negative publicity from her husband’s abuse case, so she purposely involved the media. She knew that by involving the media, she could gain an upper hand. She hoped that through the publicity, she could not only get at her abusive husband, but also send out a message to society that abusing one’s wife is a criminal offence.

On the day she decided to leave the abusive relationship, Daisy tried to do everything as she normally would, even though she had arranged for her parents to come and pick her up from the marital home. At that time, it was the beginning of the new school year. She had sent her son and sister-in-law to school as usual whereas behind the scenes she had already arranged for the parents to pick her up at a particular time. And she packed all her important documents well before her parents came to pick her so that she was all ready to leave when her parents arrived.

“Before that, I took the very important documents ... my birth certificate, all are downstairs. My room is upstairs. Before that I took the album, the certificates, marriage certificate ... All I prepare [I was] going to keep upstairs inside my cupboard. So I know they all never come inside. If I before that go out, they always check my cupboard [to see] what things I buy ... all like this ... this kind of stupid thing. So I packed all [the] things, I never go out, staying at house lah. After my mother come down, [I] just put [it all] inside the bag and go” (Line 629-635/Daisy).

Since she knew of her in-law’s habits of checking her cupboard if she went out of the house, the week before she left and after she had taken her important documents to keep in her cupboard upstairs, she did not leave the house to go anywhere so as not to raise any unnecessary suspicions. She did not take everything but only the essential documents such as birth certificates and the marriage certificate. She also took the children’s clothes and school bags. All the books and clothes were just thrown into a big plastic bag so that she and the children could leave without delay with her parents.



Knowing that crying was not going to help, Jasmine began to plan to involve others in her situation. She began to plan her leaving by exposing her husband's violent behavior to her parents by moving back to stay with her parents. Jasmine was clever in getting her parents involved subtly; she did not tell her parents about the abuse directly. She actually managed to persuade her husband to move in to stay with her parents on the pretext of saving money to buy a car of their own. Only after the parents had seen what the husband was doing to her could she tell her mother the real reason for her moving back.

Instead of involving her mother, Carnation chose to involve her mother-in-law and let her know what her husband was doing to her so that when she left, she would not be blamed:

“The reason why I go back there is because I want his mother to see what nonsense he is doing. So I used to go there to stay for two weeks” (Line 166-169/ Carnation).

Even though she did not stay with her mother-in-law, but in order to let her into her situation, Carnation would go and stay with her mother-in-law so that she would know what she was going on. She even told her mother-in-law of her plans to leave the marriage.

“Then one point of time, I told my mother-in-law that ... enough is enough and I am planning to leave” (Line 176-177/Carnation).

She actually did not leave from her marital home, but while she was having a short stay at her mother-in-law's her husband hit her again so she left for good. Carnation wanted her mother-in-law to know of her plan so that she would not be blamed for leaving.

At the stage when she was planning to leave, Carnation settled the house bills out of her own savings and did not bother to ask her husband for money. She disconnected all the utility services at their marital home so that she would not need to worry about the bills coming in after she left.

For Lily, her exit plan developed gradually. When she gave up hope in the relationship, she began actively planning her exit in an orderly manner. First, she sought a lawyer's advice regarding obtaining a parenting order for her child. She also took the child and went to stay at another apartment away from the marital home for half of the time. So eventually she took the child and escaped overseas before the husband could stop her and she applied for divorce from there.

"I was purportedly staying with my parents for an extended period and my parents helped me to keep quiet about it. They were very distressed when I went. When I went, they kept very quiet about this. They didn't tell him" (Line 589-592/Lily).

Her parents helped to keep her exit plan a secret from her husband. Her husband actually was getting a bit suspicious when they stayed away for too long and began to call her. However, she ignored all the phone calls and managed to get on the plane and leave before he could do anything.

It can be seen from these women's experiences that planning played an important role in helping them to leave. In all their plans, it can be seen that the children's welfare is the foremost concern for these women. Many of them bear the abuses and delayed their leaving for the sake of their children.

## **Children**

Another major consideration for women trying to escape intimate partner violence is related to the issue of the child's future and child custody. Women are especially fearful of losing their children. Problems of custody and visitation are widespread and not uncommon. Meyer (2011) reasoned that fear of harm and loss of custody tend to delay or hinder the disclosure of intimate partner violence to the formal support sources. Women are willing to accept and tolerate any type of abuse in exchange for not losing their children and protecting them from harm. All the women initially stayed on with the intention of providing their children with a two parent family. They did not see that how the father treated the mother was more important than having him in the home. Many choose to stay on for the children's sake, as Hibiscus admitted:

“And I did think of moving off, very quietly leaving the house with the boy but I thought to myself that my son is growing up and he needs a father, a father figure to model on. I was always thinking lah for my son, not so much about me. That's why I stayed on” (Line 288-291/Hibiscus).

Rose even went to the extent of being a private investigator herself so as to gather enough evidence to prove that her husband was unfit to take care of the children. She went around gathering evidence on the husband's immoral activities to prove that he was unfit to be a custodial parent. Rose also mentioned that women sometimes do not leave because they want to give the children a so-called “complete” family.

Reflecting on her life, Lily expressed a fear of losing her son. She was afraid that any hint indicating her desire to leave would cause her to lose her child. As Lily's husband was from a rich family, she was always fearful that with their wealth, they would be able to find means to take away the child from her. Moreover, as Lily put it, she did genuinely want to give the child a complete family:

"I genuinely wanted to make the family work for the boy's sake so I did try as much as I could during those times to make the relationship work" (Line 170-172/ Lily).

So she stayed on with the desire to give the son a "whole" family.

Daisy also endured abuse for the sake of the children even though she was not happy in the relationship.

"I also [was] not happy, really not happy. Because my husband tell me what [to do] I follow also. I just [kept] quiet because of my children's future, that's why. I cannot make any decision, I must think of my children's future. I just [keep] quiet" (Line 205-207/ Daisy).

She endured it all for the sake of the children.

### **Obstacles To Leaving**

When considering permanently ending the abusive relationship, abused women not only have to have the necessary resources to enable them to live independently of the abuser but they also have to navigate through the obstacles that make leaving difficult for them. One of the main obstacles that women have to face is that of their family members' response to their leaving. For the six of the women in this study their family members were supportive of their decision to

leave – the exception being Lily. Another major stumbling block for the women when contemplating leaving is the response of religious leaders. Many of them faced some kind of objection or condemnation from their religious leader for wanting to leave.

**Family members' response.** Two out of the seven participants encountered some objection from their family members for leaving the abusive relationship - one from her parents especially her mother and another from her uncle. However, family members of all the other women were supportive of their decision to leave. Typically, the family's objection rose out of fear of tarnishing the family name and also religious belief that one should not divorce after marriage.

Lily's family, especially her mother, was not in favor of her leaving despite knowing that she was physically abused by her husband. They thought she was being silly in wanting to leave. In fact this unsupportive attitude made Lily feel even more helpless. She lamented:

“My family was not supportive at all. In fact that was one of the difficulties that I had. That my mother would, if I come back for food or for some company ... I will be faced with my mother's questioning. “So when you are going to get back? What are you doing to get back together” ... because she would not accept that I would walk out of a relationship” (Line 302-306/ Lily).

She was frustrated by her mother's belief that prayer would solve the problem for her. Her mother also questioned what she was doing to make the relationship work.

When Carnation left, her husband's family tried to get her uncle to intervene but Carnation would not budge on her decision. Though her uncle tried to persuade her to reconcile and to think of her daughter's future, Carnation was determined to leave:

“So after I left and then they called my uncle [asking him] to get involved, try to patch us up and all that. My uncle being a priest, for him, divorce is a no, no thing lah, you know. So he tried hard to convince me to go back” (Line 187-190/Carnation).

Though Carnation's uncle made an effort to convince her not to leave, fearing that it would tarnish the family name, Carnation would not listen to him as she had already given up hope of her husband caring for her and their daughter. She believed that God would care for her and her daughter.

**Religious leaders' response.** Religion seemed to be a double edged sword in that it can be a source of support for the women facing abuse, and at the same time can be a stumbling block for women thinking of leaving. Most women of faith would struggle with their religious principle of maintaining the unity of a marriage covenant. It is important to acknowledge the dilemma that these women face when confronted with the desire to leave yet feeling bound to the marriage by the very tenets of their religious beliefs. Many abused women may not leave because of the active negative reactions of their religious leaders. However, the women typically maintained their faith.

Lily found her church leaders' attitude to her disclosure of abuse to be unhelpful, even to the point of being damaging. She was very disheartened by their comments because they made her feel like it was all her fault:

“I think especially the church leaders. They are just condemning about it. I think my friends just didn’t say much ... they didn’t say or do very much. The church leader were upright to me lah. I think they perpetuate it because they say “it’s all your fault, you are sinning to think of leaving, repent now”. I think they were far more off-putting!” (Line 135-139/Lily).

Instead of being a source of support, the religious leader heaped guilt upon her, making her think it was a sin to leave. Lily talked about how the church leaders had strongly discouraged her to leave. To Lily, instead of being a source of help, the church leader’s response was a hindrance:

“I think there were thoughts of leaving but they were quickly extinguished by church leaders who tell me that I must repent” (Line 147-178/Lily).

All her thoughts of leaving in the early years were squashed by the church leaders’ remarks.

Jasmine also had a bad experience with a religious leader when she tried to file for divorce by herself:

“I swear in my heart. It’s like they put you down. Why [did] your husband leave you? You don’t know how to look after him? ” (Line 301-302/Jasmine)

She was questioned as to why her husband left her instead of why she wanted to leave her husband. She was also put off by the religious leader who was trying to counsel her. Jasmine found it hard when she was trying to process the divorce herself and the religious leaders were making it difficult for her. Eventually, she saved enough money to get a lawyer to complete the divorce papers for her.

Orchid's experience was similar to Jasmine's where she was persuaded by a religious leader at the Syariah court to remain in the marriage. She was advised to give her husband another chance which she did but knew that it would not work and she was determined to leave him the last time round. All these women, nonetheless, finally decided that they had had enough and were going to move on without the abusive men in their lives.

### **Life After Leaving**

After examining their life having left an abusive relationship, it was clear that most survivors felt empowered. They began to gain their independence and were able to look forward to new things in their life. Four of the women went to stay with their mothers after leaving. Rose bought her house prior to leaving. Orchid left town and rented a house near her new workplace, while Lily went to stay with a friend prior to establishing her own home. All of them had their children with them and managed to get custody of the children. When asked what life is like after leaving, all the participants give a resounding 'yes' to life being better after leaving. All seven women clearly stated that they are much happier now. They feel free to pursue their dreams and have the freedom to do as they like. They felt at peace in their own home now instead of being constantly afraid. Overall, they have a sense of contentment. Their self-esteem had improved and their mental health is better.



## **Improved Self-esteem**

Life after leaving is happier for all the women. They have found peace and freedom. The overwhelming feeling I got from spending time with these women was that they have not only survived, they have triumphed. They described themselves as much happier, content, more accepting of others, free and excited, more empathic and less judgmental. They like their current lives. The women had undergone significant changes, including development of self-esteem and personal growth in response to their experiences. For Hibiscus, leaving felt like a new beginning after feeling trapped and feeling something was missing in her marriage. Lily and Orchid continued their education and professional development; both have applied and been accepted into PhD programs overseas. Daisy is happy that she is free to make decisions for herself. She enjoyed enrolling in a tailoring class and developing relationships with other people. Rose noted her overflowing joy when she was granted a divorce by the court. Orchid is happy to have left for good and described herself as having completed the life cycle. She is content and happier now. Jasmine is proud to be able to stand on her two feet. Lily is thankful to God for bringing her so far. After walking out of the abusive relationship she had endured over the past seven years, Lily is hopeful of a bright future ahead of her.

Orchid is another one who commented that life is great and the sky is her limit after walking out. She is planning to do her PhD overseas.

“Great, I can do anything I want. The sky is the limit, I can do anything. Eh ... I don’t have to have anyone’s opinion, I am so satisfied with my life” (Line 326-327/Orchid).

Orchid is happy that now she can do anything she wants as compared to before where she has to do everything according to what her husband dictated. She is satisfied with her current life and is much happier. She is not worried about being a single mother or getting old. Because she left her abusive husband, Orchid felt that she is now doing better in life and in her career. She is now free to fly high.

Jasmine says life is so much better without the unwanted kind of man in her life. She is now free to make her own decisions, to travel and most importantly she felt happy that she made the decision to leave the abusive relationship.

“I am happy what I am now. Much better. I do what I want, travel. I meet people, I don’t care about what people say. Ah... I have a freedom until, I happy, I say in my life, I have what I want and I have enough ... feel good to make decisions, to, to, to stop, how to say, to, to, take the decision and leave him” (Line 709-711/Jasmine).

She also feels proud that she can stand on her two feet.

“I feel that I stand by my legs, I stand, I’m proud as a woman. I’m proud that that doesn’t mean that I can’t live without a man, but I ... I can live without the man that was unwanted in my life” (Line 713-715/Jasmine).

Not being dependent on a man makes Jasmine feel proud of her own decision to leave and live a life that she desires.

Daisy values the freedom she has from leaving her ex-husband. It is important to her that she is able to do as she pleases without control from her ex-husband. She feels so happy that she can even now answer her ex-husband back which she never dared to do before. She joyfully declared:

“Now, I really feel good. Now I feel freedom. One more thing, whatever I do, I can take decision. Last time I don’t know what to do, now I know. Now I learn, I came here I learnt a lot of things, what is life. Now I have friends, a lot. Whenever [there is a] problem, I can talk with my friends, I can talk with my parents ... like that” (Line 472-475/Daisy).

No longer is she just “trapped” at home, she is learning new skills, meeting new friends and making decisions for her own life instead of living a life being controlled by her husband.

She felt that she has learned so much since leaving her abusive husband. She could do whatever she wants, she is working and she reverted to her own religion as a Catholic and finds comfort from it.

Daisy found herself to be more assertive after leaving and she is able to stand up against her former husband which she never did before. She no longer just remains quiet, she even dares to challenge her ex-husband and she is much happier now that she has left him.

“Now I can answer back to my husband. That is why now my husband say ar ... you go back to Melaka, your words [are] all changing already. That is good, I say, good. Now you come and beat me lah, I show you, I show you. You think what? All I quiet only ar ... no way. That one is [the] last time xxx, stupid girl, now I [will] show you” (Line 690-694/Daisy).

For Hibiscus, leaving felt like a new beginning after being trapped for so long in her marriage. She said she feels as if she has found a new life after leaving the abusive relationship:

“So in all this time, all this while, my most unhappy time is when I was with him, most unhappy time. And the moment, three years ago when we separated, everything is like loosened, happy, so much happier. In the sense that this [is] freedom and so much more happiness lah. That’s all I can say about it” (Line 498-501/Hibiscus).

She finds herself back to her active self like in her early twenties. She has gone on stage to perform, took part in a parade, and earned the beauty queen title after leaving her abusive husband. All these achievements make her feel happy that she was given a second opportunity which she never imagined could happen to her. To Hibiscus, her most unhappy period in life thus far was in her marriage. Now that she has separated, she is so much happier and has found much freedom. So for Hibiscus, leaving the abusive relationship freed her.

### **Mentally Healthier**

Being subjected to constant abuse can actually cause a woman’s mental health to go downhill. As Lily admitted, the fear of her own mental state going downhill was one of the factors prompting her to leave and afterwards she found her mental health improving.

Lily is much happier and is at peace when she is at home, there is no longer fear of going home and she feels safe now. And her mental health has improved, she is no longer anxious.

“Ah but I think life is definitely better and definitely happier without him. Because I can go home and have peace and quiet and no longer [be] subjected to the constant fear of going home, that you [are] never safe anywhere. So I think my mental health is better and I am not as anxious, [I] am happier” (Line 395-398/Lily).

Carnation commented that life being on her own is so much happier and tension free. Life is not as stressful for her now that she has left. She is able to earn her own living and she feels more positive and able to accomplish more.

“After leaving, no stress, don’t have to worry about all this nonsense and all that. Now I [am] more positive, more ar ... I feel like I can do so many better things, I feel that, totally different lah (2x). So much better now” (Line 441-442/Carnation).

Rose found peace and joy after walking out of the abusive relationship, not only for herself but also her children. There is no more fear and no more violence at home. Home finally is the place where one wants to go back to. Rose feels like a victor after walking out of her marriage. She no longer has to find excuses on behalf of her husband. And her friends commented that she seems much happier when she obtained her divorce papers than when she was married:

“Relief, relief and I [am] no longer with someone not deserving me. I find that I deserve something more. I deserve, I think with all these things that I have done, after all, this man doesn’t deserve me. I am so glad to be single again (Line 586-592/Rose)

She went around hugging her friends in the court after the divorce was granted. She found relief after the divorce. She is glad to be rid of the undeserving man in her life. She is glad to be single again!

In response to the question, “do you have any advice for women considering leaving an abusive relationship”, the overwhelming recommendation was that it is not wrong to leave an abusive relationship. Many said “don’t wait for a good time as there is none.” Leaving is hard but things do get better. In general, at the time of interview, the women were getting on with their lives, feeling better about themselves and feeling optimistic about their futures. All of them were engaged in trying to improve their lives and their feelings about themselves. They were going to further their studies, taking classes and seeking counseling or support.

### **Summary**

Women in this study described the many forms of abuse that they experienced. They also identified the ways in which they overcame obstacles, the turning points as new realizations dawned and how they utilized the resources available in order to leave the abusive relationship. There is no single explanation to explain why a woman decides to leave an abusive relationship when she does. Many different factors influence her decision. Such factors include loss of hope in the relationship and awareness of choices available to them.

In answering the first research question as to how the abused women arrived at the decision to leave, the most consistent theme in women's leaving stories is that they decide to leave when they bottom out. It is much more likely that something negative forces them to leave rather than there being some change for the better that allows them to leave. They leave because they have exhausted all known strategies for ending the violence and none have worked. They lose hope that things will ever get any better. They leave out of concern for their children. They worry about psychological, as well as physical harm.

In sharing regarding what their experience of leaving is like, which answered the second research question, the women tell of how some precipitating events caused them to realize it was time to leave, how they planned and prepared themselves and the children for the final break. They also recounted the many obstacles they faced such as the response of religious leaders and objections from family. Ultimately, it is their decision based on their knowledge of what is best for them and the children. They recognized that they are able to actually leave primarily because other people can provide them with financial, emotional and moral support. They all turned to God for support. They feel that God is always there to strengthen them. They learn that they are not alone in their experience of violence, and with time, most come to experience life as much happier people.

This study has provided some insight into how seven survivors of abuse were able to leave and remain out of their abusive relationships. These survivors accomplished leaving and remaining out of the relationship through their own courage and awareness and their ability to draw upon the resources available, to rely on their beliefs and to remain focused on life after the abuse. All of them found that life after leaving is much happier and they enjoy a great sense of freedom where the sky is their limit. Far from being passive victims, they are not only survivors but great warriors in their own right. These survivors were courageous and showed great strength in meeting the challenges in their daily lives during and after leaving. They have survived the horrible ordeal of abuse and have emerged with a great deal of knowledge and compassion which they are willing to share with others. In order to further our understanding of intimate partner violence (IPV), we must continuously look to the women who have experienced violence for knowledge, guidance and inspiration.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter summarizes the major findings of the study, presents recommendations for future study and details the implications for counselling practice. The focus of this study is on the experience of leaving intimate partner violence as told by women survivors who have permanently left an abusive relationship. Based on the narratives shared by women survivors, this research developed an in-depth understanding of the leaving experiences encountered by women survivors of intimate partner abuse. This study allowed the participants the opportunity to tell their own personal stories and to identify what acted as final contributing factors that led them down the path of severing ties with the abuser.

It is the story of their personal encounter with intimate personal violence, the struggles and pain of that abusive relationship, and the steps that they took once they made the decision to leave. The findings highlight experiences, events and feelings common to the majority of the women's narratives detailing their experiences of leaving. Their experiences can convey to the worldwide community ways to be more pro-active in assisting individuals to end harmful relationships, recapture their lives and to have productive and meaningful futures.

The intended outcome of the study is to provide helping professionals such as counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers, to gain in-depth understanding of women survivors' experiences of leaving intimate partner violence. The implication of the study for the counseling profession and recommendation for future study are all covered in this chapter.

### **Discussion of the Research Findings**

In this study, five categories emerged: (1) the experience of abuse; (2) the turning point; (3) factors affecting leaving; (4) a permanent exit; and, (5) life after leaving. Emerging from each of these primary categories were additional factors and patterns. Each factor is discussed in terms of the findings from this study, what the existing literature states and the implications of similarities or differences between this study's findings and those in the literature.

#### **The Experience of Abuse**

Even though the analysis reveals a similar pattern in the women's experiences of abuse, the violence took many different forms. All the relationships involved some form of physical violence. In a couple of cases, the physical violence only occurred on only two or three occasions. Several involved physical and psychological abuse on a daily basis. In one case, apart from physical and psychological abuse, there was also sexual abuse.

Each of the participants could identify with the abusive behaviours and tactics that were identified in the Duluth Model, which I showed to them typically after the interview or during a subsequent meeting. These women could point to each of the tactics on the wheel and clearly explain how they were used against them. Through discussion of Duluth Model, participants were able to see that they are not alone in their experiences. They were also able to more fully understand how their abusers could exert such control over them. The Duluth Model makes the pattern, intent and impact of the violence visible.

The literature is in agreement that the frequency and severity of abuse tends to increase over time (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983; Pagelow, 1981; Walker, 1984). However, the literature is contradictory regarding how the frequency and severity of abuse influences a woman's decision to leave the relationship. The women in this study did not cite frequency and severity of abuse as a factor that spurred them to leave. This was as a result of the women losing hope in the relationship and also gaining insight into their lives. They began to see how life could be different without the abusive men in their lives.

Women in this study described the abuse they experienced in marriage and identified ways in which they overcame obstacles and utilized personal and external resources in order to leave the abusive relationship. Although all the women experienced physical abuse, none of them cite physical abuse as their reason for finally leaving. Daisy experienced emotional, physical and economic abuse from her husband, but her decision to leave was based on the abuser's

infidelity. Hibiscus experienced physical, verbal, emotional and psychological abuse from her abuser, yet her decision to leave came after her ten year old son was “chased” out of the house by her husband because they had stayed overnight at her mother’s home.

It has been established that the use of violence is a well-tried means for enforcing the subordination of others (Hyden, 1994). A power imbalance in an abusive relationship is typically in the form of control by the abuser over the victim’s finances, her movements, her decision-making abilities and her role within the relationship and the family, as depicted in the Duluth model. This control leads to the victim’s dependence on the abuser and creates a power differential. This is demonstrated in the lives of the women in this study. Their husbands did not hesitate to use violence against them in order to make their wives conform to their wishes; and, to also sustain their control over their wives’ social lives, and their roles within their relationships and families.

The findings of this study are consistent with those in the literature which maintain that emotional abuse often accompanies other forms of abuse (Kirkwood, 1993; Walker, 1984). All of the women in this study in addition to physical abuse experienced emotional, psychological, verbal and sexual abuse. Emotional abuse of a controlling nature typically begins early in the abusive relationship. Women who have experienced of emotional abuse assert that this form of abuse is most damaging to them because of the lasting effects of the abuser’s degrading and hurtful words. The bruises and cuts heal, but derogatory remarks and belittling and cruel words continue to be damaging long after they

were originally said. All seven women in this study reported experiencing emotional/verbal abuse. Kirkwood (1993) believes that the use of emotional abuse, which degrades the woman and creates vulnerability, lays the foundation for the addition of different forms of abuse as the need for control increases.

The emotion of fear as experienced by these participants during their abusive relationships was very real as they never knew when the next assault was coming their way. Two participants reported feeling that they may die if they did not leave. Orchid was chased by her husband who had a knife and she commented that if she was not killed by her husband, she might end up killing him if she could not tolerate the torture any longer. Literature supports this concern of victims that their abusers may eventually kill them (Johnson et al., 2006; Seager, 2009).

This study confirmed that abused women are often subjected to several different forms of abuse, consistent with findings in the literature (Kirkwood, 1993; Walker, 1984). Most people associate the term “abused woman” with cuts, bruises and broken bones. Although this is a common form of abuse, this association allows people to think that women who do not show physical signs are not abused. Abuse can be physical, but it can be emotional/psychological, verbal or sexual as demonstrated by experiences of the participants in this study. As Lily’s story demonstrates the husband switched from being physical to more emotional and psychological abuse after he was embarrassed to find out that Lily had told other people of the physical abuse. Because physical abuse has been set up by many as the criterion to determine abuse, women who experience these

other forms of abuse have not been given the opportunity to fully express themselves. The result is that women who suffer other forms of abuse tend to be overlooked by people who would otherwise show concern and offer assistance. Therefore, we need to have a broader frame of defining abuse. The Duluth Model is a good way of helping women to recognize the abusive tactics abusers use.

### **The Turning Point**

Many studies have identified turning points as pivotal moments that determine changes in abused women's views of their relationship and influence their decisions to leave such relationships (Davis & Taylor, 2006; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007; Lempert, 1997; Patzel, 2001). Once a woman has reached a point where she loses hope in the relationship or realizes that the abuser will not change his behavior, and that her life and possibly her children may be in danger, she is better able to begin to take steps to leave the relationship (Potter, 2007; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999), as reflected also in this study.

The experience of leaving was distinct for each participant, often involving a series of decisions and actions unfolding over time. Frequently, participants described an event which precipitated initial help-seeking, with the so-called "turning point" emerging as a leitmotif throughout the interviews. Turning points are described as critical events, moments or epiphanies which lead the participants to recognize that the problem of intimate personal violence has become out of hand, and that they need to make a decision about the situation. Of particular importance, these pivotal moments precipitated a shift in participants'

perceptions of intimate personal violence: they realized that they needed to manage their situations differently, thus they were prompted to actively seek a way out. Often this is a stage that women must pass through in their leaving process.

All the participants in this study came to the point where they had lost hope in the relationship and realized that the abuser was not going to change. Lily, for example, told of her determination to leave when the situation became unbearable even though her parents were not supportive of her decision to leave. Carnation also mentioned that even if her immediate family had not been supportive of her leaving, she would still have made alternative plans to leave though that may have meant a longer period of time before she could leave for good. Fortunately her family was supportive of her decision. She made the point just to show the firmness of her desire to end the abusive relationship.

Patzel (2001) suggested that the women would experience several turning points as they repeatedly moved closer to being able to terminate the relationship. Most women leave when they hit the bottom, that is, when they give up hope of the relationship (Davis, 2006; Moe, 2007; Wuest & Merrit-Gray, 1999). They have tried everything they can think of to get the violence to end, but nothing has worked. They leave out of despair that things will ever change. The statements such as “he [will] never change”, “he never sees anything wrong” were heard often during the interviews in this study.

Additionally, they gained new insights through exposure to outside inputs and became aware of the choices that they had. “I deserved a better life”; “I don’t deserve to be treated like this”; “I was happier when I was single” indicate realizations that the women came to that helped them to move on. There is no commonality in the reasons or events that caused or would cause a woman to leave the relationship permanently. Therefore, in our attempt to support a woman seeking to end an abusive relationship, we need to explore the individual aspects of each situation and each woman’s specific needs.

This finding also suggests that women will leave in their own time and in their own way, so we need to be willing to understand and respect them and their decisions. For many helpers, this will require patience. Rather than having the goal of her leaving the abuser, there should be a collaborative support between the helper and woman so she does not feel pressured to end the relationship.

### **A Permanent Exit**

Most research in the West on battered women’s decisions to leave has been conducted in shelters. Shelter residents have been found to average between five to seven exits before they leave permanently (Barnett, 2000; Enandar & Holmberg, 2008; Khaw & Hardesty, 2007; Landenburger, 1989; Patzel, 2001; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). Non-shelter battered women who leave permanently the first time have not been featured in any of the literature. In this study an effort was made to recruit the women that we know least about - those who do not use the shelter as their means of leaving.



Contrary to the findings on battered women in studies conducted with shelter residents, the participants in this study achieved their permanent exit on their first attempt, with the exception of Orchid who left twice prior to the permanent exit. One explanation for this may be that most of the participants moved in with friends or family after leaving. Perhaps moving in with family or friends offers the additional benefit of built-in support. Another explanation may be related to successfully obtaining living and child care arrangements, which are major obstacles for women attempting to leave their abusive partner (Barnett, 2000; Fanslow & Robinson, 2010). Moving in with family or friends offers a solution. Furthermore, the women in this study had financial, educational and social resources that enabled them to leave and survive.

It is important to note that the fact that when the woman leaves and then returns to the abuser, it is not a sign of failure. Kirkwood (1993) believes that the process of leaving and returning to an abusive partner gives the woman information that she did not have previously about herself. This knowledge affords her a new perspective on her abilities that eventually enables her to permanently leave the abusive relationship. Such was the case for Orchid, who left permanently on her third attempt.

Wuest and Merritt-Gray (1999) believed that it is crucial for helpers to remain supportive when women are in the breaking free period, especially when they choose to return before making a permanent exit. Leaving takes place in diverse ways; it can be in the form of withdrawing emotionally from their partners, avoiding intimacy, purposely delaying going home and moving out for

periods of time (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999).

Hibiscus and Rose “left” way before they physically exited from the relationship by withdrawing from their husbands sexually. Thus, it is important to maintain a supportive posture even while the women are still in the abusive relationship as all this is a preparation phase for the women prior to the permanent exit.

Police play an important role in whether women leave or stay (Barnett, 2000). When the responding officer sides with the abuser, the woman may be less likely to leave. However, this is not the case for the women in this study. Their decisions to leave were not in any way influenced by the police response as, in the main, they filed the police report purely for the purpose of obtaining evidence of abuse for later divorce and child custody legal proceedings.

One of the stumbling blocks within the criminal justice system is the police response to domestic violence. McPhail et al. (2007) noted that traditionally, violence that occurs within an intimate relationship has not been taken as seriously as violence that occurs between strangers. Consequently, the abused women who file a police report must be firm and inform the police that she wants to press charges against the husband. If not, the file will remain a closed file for record purposes only. All of them have made police reports to safeguard themselves, more so with the intention of using the police reports to help them in their application of child custody than to press charges against the abusive husband. Only Rose insisted that the police charge her husband for assault. Her case was subsequently heard in the court and the husband was fined for the assault.

All the participants had limited contact with the helping professions except for two who enquired from the Women's Aid Organization (WAO) regarding what they should do if they want to leave an abusive relationship. They went for consultation only. But all the participants have stated that the presence and support of family and/or friends as an important resource that enabled them to leave permanently.

Each of the women stayed in the relationship for various reasons for some time before the final exit. It is clear that, even though there appears to be some consistency in the progress of the relationship, such as getting involved, being abused, attempting to end the abuse and finally leaving the abuser, each woman's story is filled with personal details that are unique to her.

### **The Factors Affecting Leaving**

Many factors are considered and evaluated before the victim of intimate personal violence can decide to leave. These may include economic constraints; children; societal norms about marriage and divorce; and, religious factors (Barnett, 2001; Strube & Barbour, 1984; Wang, Horne, Levitt, & Klesges, 2009). The factors that the survivors in this study considered most were related to the welfare of the children. Participants listed children's safety and mental welfare as among the principal reasons motivating them to leave.

According to Barnett (2000), "women's leave/stay decisions are multidimensional, as are the reasons for intimate partner violence" (p. 345). She suggests that many internal and external factors contribute to an abused woman's

process of leaving a violent relationship. One factor is the patriarchal and sexist structure of society, which makes it difficult for battered women to leave. O'Neil and Nadeau (1999) as cited by Barnett (2000) defined patriarchy as "the supremacy of the father over family members and the domination of men over women and children in every aspect of life" (p. 346). The deep sense of patriarchal norms and traditional values embedded in most Asian cultures may be conducive to male domination such that intimate partner violence is tolerated, sustained and perpetuated (Lee & Hadeed, 2009).

In some countries, women do not leave because violence against them is the norm and is culturally accepted (Barnett, 2000; Lee & Hadeed, 2009; Nagae & Dancy, 2010). Cultural beliefs about marital relationships provided the rationale for wives staying on in abusive relationships (Nagae & Dancy, 2010). The Japanese wives in Nagae and Dancy's studies (2010) reported the belief that "men are dominant, wives and everything they possess belong to the husband, the role of wives is not important or is insignificant, and wives cause IPV due to their disobedience to the husband" (pp. 761-762).

In their study of 251 abused women, Strube and Barbour (1984) found eight variables that contributed independently to relationship decisions: duration of the relationship, women's employment status, the number of children, the presence of child abuse, to have been a member of a previous abusive relationship, availability of social support, coping strategies and economic hardship. Their findings also indicate that employment is a particularly salient factor to women in their decision making process. This may explain why for

participants in this study financial considerations were not necessarily the major stumbling block as most were either working, believed in their own abilities or had the necessary educational qualifications to obtain employment to support themselves and their children.

Women leaving abusive relationships face frightening economic realities. Kirkwood (1993) found that finding a place to live and an income sufficient to support themselves and their children were the most significant factors for women after leaving an abusive relationship. The women in this study did state these factors as problems, but this was not an overwhelming concern. All of the women in this study had family members or friends who were willing and able to help them; they were not dependent on the availability of shelter homes. Friends and family provided housing, child care and also economic assistance until the women were able to support themselves. Women who had not worked in their married lives began to take up either full-time or part-time jobs to support themselves.

One very prominent factor that trapped the woman in abusive relationship is that of fear: fear of abandonment, fear of the perpetrator, or fear of the unknown (Gharaibeh & Oweis, 2009; Montalvo-Liendo, 2009). This fear is echoed by two of the participants of this study, Lily and Hibiscus. But once they had left, they regretted that they had let the fear keep them in the abusive relationship for so long.

It can be seen from the study that even when women were ready to leave, it was not always easy to get assistance. Religious leaders and family often encouraged women to try to make the marriage work by staying with the abuser or were “blind” to their requests for support (Latenbacher et al., 2003; Mantalvo-Liendo, 2009; Moe, 2007; Nagae & Dancy, 2010). Ninety percent of the women’s families in Nagae and Dancy’s study did not support them in leaving even when they were aware that the women were experiencing intimate partner violence. Because of the families’ attitudes, many women may continue to stay in intimate partner violence relationships. However, the findings in this study are slightly contradictory to Nagae and Dancy’s findings - only one out of the seven participants in this study faced objections from family to their leaving the abusive relationship. And even for Lily, her family’s objection was a mild one as eventually the parents did help to keep her escape plan from the husband. For the other six women, family members were a particularly important source of assistance. This was true for Daisy and Jasmine, whose family provided the most extensive material aid and assistance of the women interviewed. Others such as Rose and Orchid talked about knowing their families would always be there if they really needed them.

Contrary to findings by Lee and Hadeed (2009), which suggest that religious beliefs about preserving the family has been a driving force for many women to stay in an abusive relationship, the women in this study did eventually leave the abusive relationship after they have reached the bottom despite religious leaders’ objections. However, they maintained their belief in God just as Potter

(2007) discovered that religion and prayer (along with support from family and friends) are major sources of strength for abused women. Her study highlights women's use of religion and spirituality during the process of leaving their abusive relationship, which is true of all the women in this study.

Domestic violence is often kept a secret within the family. It is thought that it is this secrecy that allows the violence to exist and to continue. However, in this study it is interesting to note that other people knew about the abuse; family members, friends and religious leaders were aware of the abuse.

Carnation's husband had no qualms about telling people that he actually beat his wife.

"He wants to show he is in control, he doesn't listen to the wife and he even tells his friends that I beat my wife, he tells! This one his brother told me that he tells his friends that I beat my wife. I hit my wife, to show lah ... I don't know what lah ... their so called ego things. To show they are in control" (Line 279-282/Carnation).

This finding raises questions about the response of people outside of the relationship to the abuse. For example, what is their response after coming to know about it? Perhaps we need to educate people as to how to provide functional support after the abuse has been disclosed and be actively involved in tackling the issue of domestic violence.

Everyone plays a role in combating abuse in our society. We must work as a team in exploring how best to reduce the abuse and respond to the needs of the entire family unit: the abused woman, her abuser and her children. Shipway (2004) believes that for effective intervention we must encourage women to seek

help at the earliest opportunity, as that is the preferred strategy for survival. The majority of international studies show that often a woman only seeks professional help after multiple injuries (Shipway, 2004). The women in this study identified support from friends and family as the most important contribution to their leaving. These women's support network served a variety of support functions. Friends and family helped women to problem solve and obtain access to resources. They empathized, affirmed and cared for the women and their children. Friends and family provided the women with the concrete goods and services essential to their survival.

LaViolette and Barnett (2000) posit that a critical early step in ending a battering relationship is helping to formulate a safety plan which includes finding a safe place for the women and their children. A safety plan allows the woman to determine where she will go and how she will get there should she find it necessary to quickly leave her home. All of the women in this study had prior to their leaving some sort of plan, which would allow them to leave safely. Their plan included involving others such as allowing immediate family members to know of their situation, scouting for a house, getting a job away from the abuser, or enrolling in a new school.

Many researchers have cited economic dependency as one of the primary reasons women remain with their abusers (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Barnett, 2000; Gharaibeh & Oweis, 2009; Kim & Gray, 2008; LaViolette & Barnett, 2000; Walker, 1997). However, in this study only Lily mentioned financial dependency as a constraint keeping her in the abusive relationship. The other participants all



had a supportive family who received them with open arms and provided them with the necessary help in their leaving period.

Fanslow and Robinson (2010) reported family support, financial independence, getting housing, obtaining a protection order and personal resolve as factors that enable women to stay away from the abusive relationship. Consistent with previous research, all the participants in this study were provided significant help by family and friends (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). The supportive responses of the family and friends helped to sustain their decision to remain out of the abusive relationship. This positive support included unconditional support, acting as a sounding board, providing practical support (e.g., child care, housing) and assisting the woman to have some time to recover or think through the situation.

### **Life After Leaving**

All of the women have experienced some changes in their social network since leaving their violent relationship. They are no longer confined to the limited activities allowed by their abuser. They described networks that were rich with a variety of friends and family members, as illustrated by Daisy's experience as she is now free to make friends and share with friends. These women appeared to have prospered emotionally.

A study by Kim and Gray (2008) suggested that women with higher self-esteem were more likely to leave. Most of the women in this study seem to confirm this as they all believed that life could be better without the abusive men

in their lives and they believed they could stand on their own feet. In this regard, how these women were able to retain and/or regain a high enough level of self-esteem in the face of abuse would be an important topic for further research and would have significant practice implications as well.

They accomplished leaving and remaining out of the abusive relationship through their courage, their ability to utilize resources, to draw upon their self-belief, and remain focused in their goals. They were able to increase their self-esteem by obtaining higher education, believing they could overcome their problems and viewing themselves as strong, independent women. They also learned to give back to their communities by helping others who suffer abuse, and in doing so have gained a sense of purpose for themselves. The most remarkable finding of this study is the strength and courage of these women who have triumphed over experiences of abuse and humiliation. Despite years of being subjected to abuse and degradation, these women managed to escape the abusive relationships and establish and maintain productive lives free from violence.

### **Contributions of this Study**

This study provides many examples of how women found the strength to leave as well as to sustain themselves under the worst of circumstances with the support of family and friends. Perhaps one of the most important findings of this study is the emphasis survivors place on the importance of support that was freely given to them - be it financial, moral, providing shelter or child care - in helping them to leave. Individuals providing support and the roles they played for the

battered women included: a psychologist who reminded Lily that it is more harmful for her child to witness her being constantly abused than to leave; and, immediate family who provided shelter, came and picked up Daisy and her children from the marital home and provided assistance with child care while she worked. The parents of Carnation, Jasmine and Hibiscus received them back without questioning their decisions. The strong support that they received from their social networks may explain why many of them did not return to their abuser after leaving the first time. It can be seen from this study that women need not leave their communities, as it is the current practice of shelter residents (Grauwiler, 2007).

It is important to note the fact that multiple exits are not a sign of failure. It is also important to realize that there are many women who leave permanently on their first attempt. One important finding was that decisions to leave an abusive relationship often occurred after a long process of intense reflection about the relationship. For most women, this process was facilitated by others' support, although some women reported arriving at this realization on their own. Regardless of the way women arrived at this realization, all of them noted that at the beginning of their violent relationship, they all tried their best to keep the family intact by not leaving.

Besides the practical support given to them, the non-judgmental attitude of those around them helped them to not doubt their decision to leave. Women who choose leaving the marital home as a preferred way of living a violence-free life are not making an easy choice. As Foley (2003) has clearly pointed out, family

has a central place in Malaysian society and “there is a strong reluctance to threaten this institution in any way” (p. 135). By choosing to leave, the women must struggle with the potential condemnation they may face as a result of their leaving. This study shows that Malaysian women do leave despite cultural expectation for them to maintain the unity of the family and despite the possibility of their having to face condemnation for breaking up the family.

One of the key strengths of this study is that the sample was not drawn from shelters nor was it clinically based. All the participants were self-identified, in contrast to most of the studies described in the literature where participants were recruited from women’s shelters. Also the sample was drawn from a multi-racial context in Malaysia and included women from Chinese, Malay, Indian and Punjabi ethnic backgrounds.

It is noted that spirituality played a significant role in enabling these women to leave permanently. Women with religious beliefs were able to draw upon their beliefs to help them feel that they were not alone in their struggles; it allowed them to call upon a higher power for strength and courage. It is also interesting to note that regardless of the religions, all religious leaders tried to counsel the women to go back without considering the abused endured by the women.

This study adds to the body of literature that reveals the obstacles that women face when leaving abusive relationships and also gives more understanding regarding the resources or supports that enable them to sustain the leaving and make the exit permanent. As helpers realize the obstacles that

survivors face, they can then help to find ways to overcome these obstacles. Thus, they can help make leaving a viable alternative should the women choose to do so, while at the same time help to make the resources work for them.

The findings suggest strategic action be taken in informing family and friends of the need for appropriate responses, which might be tailored to different stages of the woman's help-seeking process (e.g., first disclosure then help and support following leaving). It can be seen that where people are aware of the abuse their response to this knowledge plays a part in the women's stay/leave decision. Daisy's decision to leave was swift as her parents encouraged her to leave when they learned about the abuse, whereas Lily tarried in her leaving process as her parents were not particularly warm to the idea of her leaving, despite the fact that they knew about the abuse. These findings also reinforce the need for continuing improvement in the response of those who know about the abuse and those sectors that have also already engaged with this issue.

The need for more education for the community at large cannot be emphasized enough along with the importance of educating helping professionals to better understand the dynamics of domestic violence and be informed about the resources and information available for women who initiate help-seeking. With more education, helping professionals will be better able to understand, and be more sensitive to, a woman's situation and be less judgmental (Lutenbacher et al., 2003).

Many women in the Lutenbacher et al. (2003) study claimed a “lack of awareness and knowledge of available resources or the consequences that would occur if they or others initiated help seeking” (p. 59). Therefore, it is essential that information regarding resources available to help those in an abusive relationship be widely disseminated not only among the women, but also the general public so that when approached by women seeking help they know what help is available.

Davis and Taylor (2006) argued that prompt referral of battered women to formal or informal support groups may help reduce the long-term effects of abuse and empower women leaving the violent relationship. Clearly, a mental health professional should be in a culture that supports and educates the mental health professional in relation to the assessment, support and referral of women as this will create the best mental health practice for women experiencing domestic violence.

Lempert (1997) maintained that for many women the primary help seeking strategy was simply telling others about the violence. This is exactly what many of the participants in this study did. They either told their parents directly or moved to stay with their parents or in-laws so that they could see what was happening. Thus, it is important that we see this as cry for help. How we respond to this initial cry for help will be crucial to whether the women continue to seek help or not. Lempert emphasized the importance of believing the women’s stories as it has a positive effect and “having someone believe them was legitimating as it bolstered their sense of personal worth, frequently validated their perceptions, and often mitigated the effects of abusers’ definition” (p. 299).

Participants from Lempert's study call attention to the importance of the helper listening and not imposing their own views on them. They were the one who ultimately had to face their own situations and not the helper. A good helper is one who suggests alternatives but does not impose them on the women. We must allow the women to define their own situation, as imposing on the women would put the abused women in the same relation to the helpers as they are with regard to the abuser (Lempert, 1997).

McPhail, Busch, Kulkarni and Rice (2007) commented that choice often works as a "double-edged sword" as it might be difficult for a traumatized individual in crisis to make the best decision for herself. However, we need to be sensitive to women's own assessments about appropriate action to take, including leaving or staying, as the decision to stay or leave is only one among many other difficult decisions an abused woman makes every day. It is suggested that policies or programs that encourage leaving as a strategy need to have a built-in mechanism for responding to the unique circumstances of each of the women's lives and her assessment of what might result from ending the relationship (Bell, Goodman, & Dutton, 2007).

While every woman deserves to be in a healthy relationship and live a life free of violence, we must not assume that leaving is the magic solution that will improve her life. Studies indicate that remaining with their abusive partner may be the least hazardous option for some women, at least in the short-term (Anderson, 2003; Bell et al., 2007). It would be helpful in times like these to help the women to see what they gain and lose by leaving or remaining with their

partners and thus make an informed decision. Belknap (1999) has asserted that it is critical for helpers to understand the moral conflicts inherent in abusive relationships when helping women in making the leaving or staying decisions. Our response should be according to the women's personal perceptions of the type and nature of help they would like to receive and from whom they would like to receive it; and not to shovel down their throat what is in place. Ultimately, the women's personal perception of what is best must be respected. It is documented that women are fearful that they may be asked to accept the helper's definition of the situation and recommendation of the appropriate response (Fugate, Landis, Riordan, Naureckas, & Engel, 2005). This is so as to not place them in the same power relationship to the helper as they are to the abuser

Helpers and others need to understand that women will leave abusive relationships when they are ready, not when someone else thinks they should leave. Based on her own experience, Carnation recommends to others in a similar situation:

"The time will come ... they will automatically ... will think that enough is enough. Because once you have the thought of leaving already, eventually one day you will leave. Why later? Do it now lah ... Ya do it now. Ya, if you have the thought of leaving, just leave" (Line 499-503/Carnation).

The strength of women in the process of leaving has been acknowledged and identified. This acknowledgement of strength is key to the empowerment of the women, as it is seeing them as survivors as opposed to victims (Merritt-Gray & Wuest, 1995).



### **Implications for Counseling Practice**

The results of this study have implications for practitioners who work with women survivors of intimate partner violence. They reveal an in-depth description of women survivors' experience of leaving intimate partner violence, what helped them to come to the decision to leave and what factors that have enabled them to stay out. This has strong implications for counseling and psychology practice. Thus, the following suggestions are made for application of the findings to the respective practices.

First, it is important for the practitioners to routinely screen for abuse when taking women's histories. Practitioners must learn to recognize potential symptoms of abuse as the women may not bring it out voluntarily. Another critical factor for counselors to consider is that women define the abuse differently. In this study, some women did not perceive her relationship as abusive until the abusers were physically abusive. Many of the women were not aware that some of the behaviors such as denigrating name-calling was abusive. Sexual abuse also raises questions as women tend not to classify spousal use of pornography or indulgence in extra-marital affairs as abusive behavior. The elements of abuse are clearly subjective, and need to be identified and qualified by the woman who experienced it. However, a checklist can serve as a guide for the woman to discuss what behaviors and events are defined as abusive by professionals. The Duluth Model can be good place to start.

The importance of listening cannot be emphasized enough. A trusting dialogue between the abused woman and counselor is required, where listening is the key to determining what it is that this abused woman is asking for at this specific time in her life. This tie in very neatly with Roger's concept of being empathic, which means temporarily living her life, moving about in it delicately without making judgment, sensing meanings of which she is scarcely aware (Rogers 1975). This sensitive understanding by another may have been one of the important elements in bringing the women survivors out of their isolation and into the world of relatedness. Counselor should adopt a position of accepting and non-judgmental which is the highest expression of empathy. And these two qualities have been expressed by the women survivors to be of important in helping them to end and remain out of the abusive relationship. We must make an active effort to remain "present" with the women to hear their stories. Active listening builds the environment of trust needed to ascertain the lived experiences of these women. The gentle and sensitive companionship of an empathic stance, accompanied by sensitive understanding, which comes from its nonjudgmental quality, provides illumination and healing in the women's live. Although it is difficult for these women to journey back into an extremely difficult time in their lives, it also can bring them new insights through talking out aloud to someone who is interested. For example, Orchid realized that she would never have known she could be so strong and able to go so far in her academic pursuits if she had not left. Another participant, Lily, after recounting her experience of leaving the

abusive relationship, realized that that her life is like that of a phoenix - she realized she could rise above the past.

Secondly, an in-depth understanding of women survivors' leaving experiences enables a practitioner to be an effective therapist in providing intervention services. Without an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence, practitioners may end up doing more harm than good. To understand the wider needs of clients in abusive relationships, the counseling professional should take time to read literature on providing appropriate care when dealing with women in abusive and violent relationships. Ignorance of their needs could lead to misunderstandings. Thus, we are encouraged to understand the abused women's decisions and help-seeking behavior within the context of their ongoing struggle to free themselves from harm and not to impose our values and recommendations on them. Intervention should incorporate an integrative approach coordinating resources from the community by way of supportive efforts in advocacy, legal matters, housing, financial issues, mental health care, parenting and child care to name a few (Rhatigan et al., 2005).

Thirdly, the findings revealed that leaving is not an easy choice. The women must struggle with the potential condemnation that they may face when they leave. Women survivors have to work through many practical obstacles. It is important for practitioners to have an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence and its power in "trapping" women in the violent situation. Working with this unique group of women survivors requires counselors to be patient, understanding, and sensitive. Counselors also need to understand that

women will leave abusive relationships when they are ready, not when someone else thinks they should leave.

Statements such as “nobody said I was wrong for leaving” and “no one condemned me for leaving” were often mentioned by the participants in their sharing about leaving, especially during the informal session with the interviewer. It shows the importance of respecting the women in their decision to leave. By respecting their decision, it gives them courage and strength to go on in life. Lily emphasized the importance of not condemning the women for leaving.

While it may be tempting to advise women to leave, it is essential to be supportive of their choices while ensuring they know how to be safe. Any mental health professional aiming to assist the abused women must first attend to their safety issues. Both the barriers of their immediate environment and the individual beliefs that keep women bound to abusive partners need to be addressed as well.

Often women were labeled either a “victim” or “survivor” depending on whether she was staying or leaving - “victim” if she stayed or a “survivor” if she left, leaving out those women whose true choice was to remain in the relationship with the hope that the violence will eventually end. I concur with Fleury, Sullivan and Bybee (2000) in saying that ultimately, the women themselves are in the best position to determine what the best decision is for their lives, whether staying or ending the relationship. We as a community need to ensure that women have the resources and support they need to make that decision. The women in this study suggest that whatever the decision is, it must be made by the women themselves

and not be forced on them. They will leave when they are ready, not when someone else thinks that they should.

The assistance given to the women needs to go beyond facilitating access to resources such as financial aid, housing, child care, legal aid and police protection; the women also need to learn how to make the resources work for them (Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). Coker et al. (2002) as cited in Davis and Taylor (2006) commented that along with structured support, informal, unstructured, supportive encouragement within personal encounters by mental health personnel may reduce the risk of adverse mental outcomes by fifty percent.

The knowledge of the effects of leaving and staying is crucial both for mental health professionals, advocates and other individuals working to increase women's safety and well-being. McPhail et al. (2007) proposed that instead of "making assumptions (man = perpetrator, women = victim) and assigning the standard feminist intervention ("men in batterer treatment programs and women in support groups" (p. 835), we need to listen more closely to what the victim and survivor want, rather than just offering a more narrow scope of interventions based solely on the feminist construct of domestic violence. The metaphor of a puzzle here is apt, as pieces must fit with each other in order for the complete picture to emerge.

Many women leave and return to their abusers many times because of inadequacies of the helping systems, the lack of resources, their own ambivalent feelings, and their desires to keep their families intact (Lutenbacher et al., 2003). Therefore, understanding the process of leaving is crucial for those professionals

who work with abused women. More knowledge can allow greater empathy and support, and spare women from needless and prolonged suffering at the hands of those who mean to help.

Fourthly, findings from this research show the need for mental health professionals to be aware of possible religious influences and resources that help women leaving the abusive relationship; and, also how these may be an obstacle. Religious leaders involved in counseling must be certain that families are violence free before they counsel women to give problem marriages “just one more try”. Women’s voices need to be heard. They need to be believed and have their experiences validated. They do not need to be labeled and judged. It is suggested for all state religious departments to have at least one trained counselor and for religious personnel to be equipped with basic counseling skills.

Last but not least, practitioners need to be advocates for effective legislation and policies to support women experiencing intimate partner violence. A multidisciplinary approach including health professionals, legal practitioners, social workers, economists, education and other organizations all working to address prevention, education and intervention needed to stop domestic violence. In addition, a thorough assessment of a woman’s situation needs to be carried out to determine the level of support and availability of needed resources. I am in agreement with Davis and Taylor (2006) that a comprehensive multi-disciplinary approach needs to be in place to assist these women to move beyond just leaving to a “journey that resists the devastating effects of a chronic abuse and leads women towards healing and empowerment” (p. 207).

Dersch, Harris, and Rappleyea (2006) indicated in their study the lack of training in partner violence in the current curricula of mental health professionals. Continuing education could include education on intimate partner violence, especially in terms of dialogue, appropriate intervention and referrals. Active listening would provide a more accurate assessment of what information this woman would deem meaningful and useful at that particular juncture in her life. Furthermore, listening to all the experiences of abuse and events encountered by women survivors may lead a counselor to experience vicarious traumatization. Hence, the element of practitioners' self-care should be integrated into their training with the aim of preventing vicarious traumatization, which is closely connected to burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress as well as work stress in working with trauma survivors (Sabin-Farrel & Turpin, 2003).

### **Recommendations for Communities with Abused Women**

In our attempt to help the abused women, the need to support family and friends to offer appropriate responses should not be overlooked. As can be seen from this study friends and family are the main sources of informal support that women first turn to for help, which is consistent with Fanslow and Robinson (2010) study. They stated that the majority of women who experienced intimate partner violence did not report it to the police; therefore it is important to extend our response to victims who are beyond formal sources of support. Consideration may need to be given to raising public awareness of what one can do to assist the abused woman, as a helpful response is the first step in assisting women in

combating the abuse. This could be accomplished through producing resource information detailing how to respond supportively when a woman confides she is being abused. This information should include links with allied health services, workplace human resources departments, religious bodies, women shelter organizations (WAO, AWAM & etc) and welfare departments.

Resources that contain information outlining what are the helpful and unhelpful responses and providing practical strategies should be widely distributed to the wider community to ensure that family and friends are enabled to provide appropriate assistance when women communicate with them about the violence. Public awareness campaigns can be carried out and this information should also be made available through support agencies such as women's shelters, public libraries and clinics. Lutenbacher et al. (2003) believed that on-going community awareness campaigns about domestic violence and preventive education for all are needed not only in schools but also in the workplaces. More consistent educational programs and outreach services at workplaces will increase potential points of service for high-risk women and their families.

Furthermore, anyone involved in providing assistance to the victims of abuse (such as paraprofessionals, shelter staff, religious leaders, personnel at state religious departments and police personnel) needs to be thoroughly trained in terms of identification of abuse; the negative effects of abuse during and after ending the relationship; the psychological symptoms associated with abuse; the ability to probe and ask questions about domestic violence in a sensitive manner; how to develop a safety plan; knowing the effects of abuse on women and



children; how to best support women in the short and long term; and, the importance of respecting a woman's decision and give support regardless of whether the woman's decision is to stay or leave.

There is a need to evaluate to what extent One Stop Crisis Centers have been implemented and their effectiveness as the women in this study when asked about the One Stop Crisis Centers seemed to be unaware of the existence of such facilities. The One Stop Crisis Centers in hospitals should be staffed with trained personnel and given funding for supplemental training. It is recommended that training of medical personnel must not only heighten clinical awareness but also inculcate a women-centered perspective and a non-judgmental medical response when handling domestic violence cases. Besides trained medical personnel, the team should include a trained counselor who can provide emergency counseling service for the women. The State also needs to employ and train more welfare officers who are trained to handle cases of domestic violence so that these women are given assistance with the least amount of delay.

As mentioned by Bell & Goodman (2006), ultimately it is by learning from each other's perspectives, examining our own biases and reminding each other of our common goal of reducing rates of intimate partner violence, that we were able to work together and find ways to reduce violence against women. Hence, there is a need for a national committee to include government (police, health, social welfare, religious departments) non-governmental organizations, mental health practitioners, researchers who are actively engaged in the area and maybe even women survivors of domestic violence. It should meet regularly be

mandated to do planning, to monitor and evaluate the national domestic violence policy and program.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The participants in this study were all from urban areas, where access to the resources needed for leaving, such as access to transportation and to health, including mental health, providers, are much more readily available as compared to those available for abused women living in the rural areas. It is recommended that a future study be conducted with the abused women living in the rural areas to see what resources they can utilize or are available to help them.

The next logical question would be: what is the difference between women who have left abusive relationships and those women who have stayed? Future research with women who have remained in their relationship with abusive men would need to be conducted. It may also be of particular interest to do a study of the grown-up children of women who have left abusive relationships to determine whether living in an abusive environment might influence them to become abusive or to be abused in their own relationships.

Also, the different experiences that women experienced while utilizing law enforcement warrant greater investigation. Many make the police report just for the record. From what the women in this study stated, they felt the system did not listen to them or understand their individual needs. They often felt pushed all over the place and had little control over what happened. They have a certain mistrust of the law enforcement and legal systems. Further research to explore

how the formal systems, such as the legal system, or informal supports, such as family and friends, can best provide the help needed. It is likely that having appropriate support could limit the deleterious consequences of leaving. It is essential to provide the most comprehensive assistance possible to women needing it. Thus, further study to investigate how the various support systems interact so as to provide comprehensive support for women in abusive relationships is imperative.

It would be useful to study the benefits and risks of the current legal system. Using a similar approach involving gathering interview data from women who have accessed the legal system as well as those who have not could yield information for improving the system so as to provide greater support.

Another important topic for study is that of the emotional aspects of leaving such as shame, embarrassment and feelings of insignificance. How do women cope with and eventually overcome these feelings? The better mental health professionals understand the complexity and ultimately damaging impacts of the intimate partner violence experience, the better they will be in helping the woman through this difficult time as she adjusts to staying away from the abusive relationship and assist her in resolving issues related to the abuse.

Lastly, research studies should be published not only in professional journals but also in popular magazines as domestic violence is an issue that concerns the general public. By publishing in popular magazines, public awareness may be enhanced and more women will know that they are not alone.

They do not need to keep the abuse secret. Help is available and they can get some idea as to where and how to gain access to that help.

### **Summary**

The experience of leaving and the process of healing from an abusive relationship can last a lifetime. The findings from this study highlight the importance of the support system and serve as a foundation to improve and develop intervention program to help for abused women and their families. Strategies to assist the women need to be coordinated and the information widely disseminated or else families will continue to suffer as intimate partner violence does not just concern the women, but also concerns the future of her children and extended family. As mental health practitioners we need to understand the dynamics of domestic violence and be understanding when dealing with the victim so as to not re-victimize this person. The importance of adequate education and training in dealing with these women should never be underestimated.

We need to take account of abused women's perspectives of what assistance would be helpful for them. With better understanding from the abused woman's perspective, making the information available to formal bodies and informal helpers, we thus create a better understanding and tolerance towards the woman's experience and we are more likely to develop better interventions to address her immediate and long term needs. Lempert (1997) lamented the failure to account for the perspectives of the women resulting in "assistance built on theory, ideology, and /or prior conceptualizations that are not consonant with

battered women's lived experience" (p. 306). Further knowledge allows for greater empathy and support, and spare women from needless and prolonged suffering at the hands of those who mean/are meant to help. This study thus helps the helping professional and whoever wants to help to be more in tune with the woman's experience and be more empathetic to the woman's situation.

### **Closing Remarks**

The whole process of conducting this study, planning, recruiting participants, interviewing them, drawing out their stories and analyzing the data has had a powerful impact on me as a married woman, counselor and researcher. The most incredible part of the whole process was the willingness of the women to share their most intimate stories and experiences with me, a total stranger. During the interview process, women would discuss the events of their relationships as if they had happened very recently, regardless of how long ago the abuse occurred. They were animated and showed deep emotion in telling their stories. Several indicated that they were hopeful that their participation could lead to prevention efforts and the education of others. They never cease to amaze me; despite having been through so much they were still willing and able to be altruistic. These women put themselves in a situation where they would have to relive a difficult time in their lives, yet they were courageous in reliving it.

I now have a better understanding of the importance of the reflexive process. At times, it was difficult to separate myself as a counselor from my role as a researcher. As the women recounted their difficulties I found it challenging to remain in my role as researcher and not to move into the role of counselor to empower them further. I could see their continued struggle and wanted to be in a position to help with those difficulties. I hope that as I use what I have learned to inform not only my practice but the field of counseling, I can honor what these women have undergone and what they were willing to do to help others in similar situations. I believe what I have learned from these women and this process has made me a better counselor and researcher. This has been an educational and emotional experience for which I am thankful.

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## **Appendix A: Information Sheet for Participants**

### **Study Title: Experience of Leaving Among Survivor of Intimate Partner**

#### **Violence in Malaysia**

Hi, I am Mee Chooi, a postgraduate student in the Department of Educational Psychology & Counseling at the University of Malaya, where I am pursuing for a PhD in Counseling. I am a qualified counselor, registered with the *Lembaga Kaunselor*, Malaysia. I am carrying out a research study on survivor of intimate partner violence on their experience of leaving. By doing this I hope to gain a holistic understanding of the experiences that women goes through and hope that this information would be able to improve support that we may grant to other women in the similar situation.

If you have experienced violence in marriage be it physical, psychological, emotional or sexual violence, you are invited to take part in this study. This participation is voluntary and before you decide, please take time to read the following information and if you wish to discuss this further, you may email me at [meechooi@hotmail.com](mailto:meechooi@hotmail.com).

#### **What is the study about?**

This study is about women experiencing violence in marriage, be it physical, psychological, emotional or sexual in nature. I want to find out from you what it is like for you to experience violence in your marriage and what support is helpful for you to come out of this experience.

#### **What is requires of me if I take part?**

It is entirely your choice if you want to participate in this study or not. If you do decide to participate, I will ask you to sign a consent form to indicate your willingness to take part in this study. You are still free to withdraw at anytime and without giving reason even after you have given your consent.

If you consent to take part in this study, I will arrange to have interview(s) (maybe just 1 interview but not more than 3) with you in a place, date and time that is convenient to you. During the interview, I will ask you to share your experiences and thoughts about the violence you gone through in an intimate relationship. The interview will be taped with your permission.

All information collected during the course of this study will be kept strictly confidential. All information will be anonymous and you will be given a pseudo name so that nobody can identify you.

## **Appendix B: Email blast**

**Care to share?**

### **PLEASE HELP TO CIRCULATE**

Dear All:

I am doing a research study with women, trying to understand the experiences of those who have gone through violence & abuses in marriage and the process they went through in leaving the abusive relationship. By doing this study, I wish to gain a holistic understanding of the experiences that women go through and hope that this information would be able to improve the support that we may grant to other women in similar situation.


I have attached a copy of information sheet for people who may want to participate or know more about this study. Please help me to circulate this to the contact in your email list. Feel free to email [meechooi@hotmail.com](mailto:meechooi@hotmail.com) if you have any queries.

Appreciate your kind assistance. Thanks.

Warmest Regards,

Mee Chooi

## Appendix C: Letter from University Malaysia

**UNIVERSITI  
MALAYA**

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Tarikh : 11 Mei 2010

**KEPADA SESIAPA YANG BERKENAAN**

Nama : Ling Mee Chooi  
No. Kad Pengenalan : 690616 - 08 - 6166  
No. Pendaftaran : PHB 080014  
Program : Doktor Falsafah secara Kursus dan Penyelidikan (PhD)  
Bidang Pengajian : Kaunseling

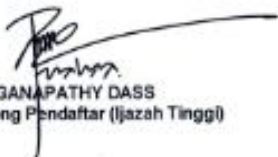
Dengan ini disahkan bahawa calon di atas adalah pelajar Ijazah Doktor Falsafah Secara Penyelidikan di Fakulti Pendidikan, Universiti Malaysia mulai **Semester 1, 2008/2009**.

Beliau sedang menjalani penyelidikan dan memerlukan maklumat penyelidikan yang boleh didapati dari Sekolah/Pejabat/Institusi/Universiti Tempatan/ EPRD/Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum/Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB)/Bahagian Pendidikan Guru/ Jemaah Nazir Sekolah/Bahagian Teknologi Pendidikan/Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri/Perpustakaan/ Majlis Sukan Negara dan Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia.

Oleh itu sukacita dapat tuan/puan memberi kerjasama kepada beliau. Kerjasama yang diberikan didahului dengan ribuan terima kasih.

Sekian.

Yang benar,

  
**MAHAGANAPATHY DASS**  
Penolong Pendaftar (Ijazah Tinggi)

MAHAGANAPATHY DASS

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Pejabat Dekan: (603) 7967 5000 Faks: (603) 7966 5006 • Pejabat Dekan: (603) 7967 5079/5080/5089 Faks: (603) 7967 5141/5089  
Penolong Pendaftar: (603) 7967 5131/5146/5147 • Pejabat Ais: (603) 7967 5006/5133 Faks: (603) 7967 5130  
Jabatan Ais Pendidikan dan Kemajuan/Jabatan Pendidikan Melayu dan Sains: (603) 7967 5040 Faks: (603) 7967 5148  
Jabatan Pendidikan Bahasa dan Literasi/Jabatan Kurikulum dan Teknologi Pengajaran: (603) 7967 5027 Faks: (603) 7967 5139  
Jabatan Psikologi Pendidikan dan Kaunseling/Jabatan Pengurusan Perancangan dan Dasar Pendidikan: (603) 7967 5036 Faks: (603) 7967 5810

## Appendix D: Inform Consent Form

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### WOMEN'S RESEARCH PROJECT

You are invited to participate in a research entitled: Experience of leaving an abusive relationship among survivors. You were invited for participation because you were previously abused by your partner, have been away from that relationship for a full year or more, and have expressed willingness in participating.

The purpose of this form is to protect your rights as a project participant. Please be sure to read and understand all the following before you sign this consent form.

#### **Information on the study**

The purpose of this study is to increase our knowledge of abused women who permanently leave their abuser, so that we can provide necessary support for the women. This project is not for the purpose of therapy or counseling, although you might find participation personally helpful.

The results of this study are expected to help other abused women, their friends and families, professionals from whom women seek help, and society at large.

#### **Confidentiality**

Your participation will be private and confidential. All data that can be identified with you will remain anonymous and confidential. Information such as transcript and taped interview will be kept in a locked cabinet, no one else except myself and maybe my supervisor will have access to them.

#### **Participation**

You will be asked to participate in at least one interview lasting approximately 1.5-2 hours. All interviews will be audio taped. Interviews will be conducted in the place that feels most comfortable and convenient to you.

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may refuse to participate with no due repercussion to you. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

It is possible that you may experience some uncomfortable feelings as a result of specific questions asked. You may refuse to discuss any particular question(s) and terminate the interview. You are also encouraged to ask any question you might have about the project at any time.

## **Contact**

If you have any queries at anytime about this study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Ling Mee Chooi at 016- 2862776 or email me at [meechooi@hotmail.com](mailto:meechooi@hotmail.com)

## **Consent**

Your participation in this project is strictly voluntary. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, discussed any questions with me, and that you have decided to participate in the study. You may withdraw at any time after signing this form without penalty, should you decide to terminate your participation in this project.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix E: Contact Numbers for Support**

Contact Numbers for support & counseling, given to the participants at the end of interview.

Sister in Islam	03-77856121
Women's Aid Organization (WAO)	03-79563488
Tele-counselling KL	1-800-88-2600
The Bridge Communication Sdn Bhd (counseling)	03-92877251
Life Line Association	03-92850039
AWAM	03-77843433
CCM Fei Yue Family Service Centre	03-89451612
Women Centre for Change (WCC) Penang	04-2280342

## Appendix F: Demographic Information Form

Date :  
Time of Interview :  
Place :  
Interviewee's fictitious name :  
Interviewer :

### Demographic Information:

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Race: \_\_\_\_\_

Religion: \_\_\_\_\_

No. of Children: \_\_\_\_\_ age & gender: \_\_\_\_\_

How long has it been since you last left your abuser? (years & months) \_\_\_\_\_

Current marital status \_\_\_\_\_ (Indicate no of years or months separated or divorce)

Highest level of education completed: \_\_\_\_\_

Current employment status: \_\_\_\_\_

Household	Current	Previous
Income level : RM10,000-RM20,000	_____	_____
(Per Annum) RM20,001-RM30,000	_____	_____
RM30,001-RM40,000	_____	_____
RM40,001-RM50,000	_____	_____
RM50,001-RM60,000	_____	_____
RM60,001-RM70,000	_____	_____
RM70,001-RM80,000	_____	_____
RM80,001-RM90,000	_____	_____
RM90,001-RM100,000	_____	_____
RM100,001 & above	_____	_____

## Appendix G: Interview Protocol

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

This study aimed to collect data on participants' experience of leaving intimate partner violence. All information shared will be confidential and will be restricted to the use of this project only. Please read the consent form and signed it if you agree to participate in this interview.

Guide to Interview	Researcher's note	Researcher's comments Issues/Reflection
<b>Part A: Getting started- Rapport building</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Getting to know the participant</li><li>• Participants' rights &amp; confidentiality</li><li>• Explanation of research objectives</li></ul>		



<p><b>Part B: Conversation</b> based on interview and observation at research sites</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me about your experience before leaving your abusive.</li> <li>2. Tell me about your experience of leaving your abusive.</li> <li>3. Tell me how is it for you now. What is your life like now?</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did you meet? What did he do?</li> <li>• Talk about significant events in the relationship</li> <li>• Talk about decision to leave</li> <li>• What goes through your mind when you think of leaving?</li> <li>• What helps?</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Part C: Concluding the interview</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there anything else you would like to tell me about</li> <li>• Appreciation</li> </ul>		

Thank you for your cooperation and participation in this interview. All that you shared with me is confidential and I may call you for further clarification if I need more information from you.

## Appendix H: Example of Participant Early Code

Early code from interviews	
Abuse-physical, emotional, psychological, verbal	<p>“A lot of it was psychological especially when I had told people about the physical abuse. He was embarrassed. At first he told to never tell anyone, in the end I did. When he found out he was very embarrassed so he changes it more from physical to psychological. So he would like throw thing at me and says “see I know that won’t hurt you”. (Line 32-36, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I think it was very subtle. I don’t think I can say exactly when because I didn’t even realized it was happening, probably from the beginning. From the time we got married, he began get (pause) more and more bad temper and controlling and so. For example, he would insist that I do what he wants even when he knew that I don’t want or be miserable doing it. He would still insist on it. If I didn’t do what he wanted then he would throw his temper at me. So more and more that increases and more and more he show off temper became more violent”. (Line38-45, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I think eh.. he was physically abusive from the time I was pregnant. I think at that time I didn’t really talk about it. Probably by the time the violence was quite real when he was few month old and I think I got a concussion” (Line 119-122, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I know that there are cycles that I observed in him where he would go through the period where he’s becoming more and more moody. It will like a volcano getting ready, can hear the rambling, getting ready for explosion. So you could see he become very moody, he walked around and mutter to himself, talking to himself and he is like very bad mood. Little thing he would snap and all that and he is not pleasant to be and then it will build up more and more and</p>

	<p>he would just blow up” (Line 234-240, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>So you know, he would become violent loh and then I would be scare and he would be angry because actually was impossible to pacify once he get into that mood. If I kept quiet, he gets angry because I kept quiet. If I talk he gets angry because of what I say (voice raise). So anything I did would make him angry. If I stay in the room then I will get all kind of temper thrown at me, is like he has lost control and he has to finish his tantrum before it subside again. So we just have to sit through with it. If I tried to get out of the house, he’ll get even more angry because I tried to walk out. But in the house it will just be a mad house because he will be throwing tantrum, throwing everything around, even if he didn’t hit me, he would come around in a very threatening way, in loud and angry voice. And I would be afraid that he would physically hit me because of the way he came toward me in a very aggressive way (Line 243-254, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc).</p>
Financial constraint	<p>“Then it was difficult because I was not financially independent” (Line 21, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“When I have thought of leaving, the obstacle was so great. I was not financially independent, I have no way of supporting the boy. I have no where to go and that there is always the thought that they will snatch the boy away from me.” (Line 148-151, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I still have no income of my own. So I knew I still at his mercy financially. So again, I have no mean to leave” (Line 201- 202, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“So any thought of leaving I had, realistically I thought, I don’t think I can do it. I need to fix all</p>

	<p>the other things but it was such an impossible”.(Line 151-153, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p>
Custody of child/child interest	<p>“There will always be this fear that his family, his father will come and take this child away” (Line 21 &amp; 22, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“From beginning 2005 that’s when my friend begin to tell me that and that’s when I even heard it from the therapist around March so that confirm it. It confirm what I had in my mind but was very unsure of that is when it is really time to move because previously I have stay on wanting to keep the family whole for the boy”(Line 113-117, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p>
Awareness of choice	<p>“That it is ok to walk out. I think society give a very wrong messages. It gives messages that it is all the woman’s faults, it is all your faults, you cannot keep the him happy, now you are doing something evil, breaking up the family. How can you be so selfish. They will say thing like that. I think people often expect woman to put up with abuse, is just a small thing only. So I think woman need to know that they have value. That it is ok for them to stand up and say no to abuse and that really when they are doing it, it is not selfish because children who are subjected, watch their mother subjected to abuse, they also suffer emotional abuse” (Line 75- 83, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“actually it was an impossible situation, it really was but it was also intolerable. I knew that if I stay on I would mentally go down hill very badly. So I knew I had to leave even though I know I couldn’t. I have no money, I had no where to go”. (Line 174- 177, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“And I make genuine effort to reconcile but the truth is after a while, he went back with his old</p>

	<p>way. So then, I knew that counseling or not, he is not going to change”. (Line 212-214, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I knew that that was it lah, he is not going to change. Counseling was making no progress, he didn’t want to admit anything wrong”. (Line 217-218, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“To me, I believe people still have a choice you. God can work but God will not force someone against their will. So I didn’t believe that if I pray everything would be resolve because I already tried but it didn’t work. And I didn’t think that is God’s fault or my fault for not praying. It is somebody ‘s fault, who is stubborn and just doesn’t want to change”. (Line 309-313, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“And I know also from what I read, typically the abusive men do use the legal system and the children. That means the parenting right over children to cause a lots of trouble for ex-wife”. (Line 343-345, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I am taking the child out because I couldn’t stand the abuse anymore”. (Line 425-426, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“giving up on the relationship completely, knowing that there is no more hope and I think the counselor help too, like help to reinforce some of the other thing, like is ok to go if it is intolerable.” (Line 553-555, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“For my part is the decision knowing that the best for the boy is not to stay but to go” (Line 549-550, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc).</p>
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Control freedom	<p>“he would insist that I should not go out with my friends on weekend. I cannot meet up with them after his working hour that I had to be home when he got home from work” (Line 50-52, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I think that one he used a lot of psychology. He would says my parents are not good. He would criticized my family a lot, and he would say “Oh I am just protecting you”. He would use that a lot, that I just protecting you. But it was quite controlling” Line 58- 61, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc).</p>
Religious leader response unsupportive	<p>“I think especially the church leader. They are just condemning about it. I think my friend s just didn’t say much but they didn’t say or do very much. The church leader were upright, to me lah. I think they perpetuate it because they say is all your fault, you are sinning to think for leaving, repent now. I think they are far more off-putting(Line 135-139, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc).</p> <p>“I think there were thought of leaving but they were quickly extinguish by church leader who tell me that I must repent. (Line 147-148, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc).</p>
Negative Family member & friends response	<p>“Probably by the time the violence was quite real when he was few month old and I think I got a concussion. So I think I told friends then but unfortunately they were the wrong friends, they were not helpful” (Line 120-123, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)..</p> <p>“My family were not supportive at all. They thought that I should reconcile and thought that I was being silly. Nobody confronted him, until now, nobody confronted him. Ahr.., ya, my family was not supportive at all. In fact there was one of the difficulty that I have. That my mother would, if I come back for food or for some company, I will be face with my mother</p>

	<p>questioning. Of “so when you are going to get back? What are you doing to get back together”. Because she would not accept that I would walk up of a relationship” (Line 300-306, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc).</p> <p>“the support that I did receive was not my family. I knew my parents would never let me starve but I have to put up with the psychological battering. It feels like battering, even though she meant well but that is what it felt like”(Line 316-319, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc).</p>
Support: religion, family, friends, & experts.	<p>“Actually it help that I have input from the psychologist in U.S. he told me that and my friend in U.S and Australia who told me that. They felt that XX is more traumatized by watching his father abuse me repeatedly and that it would be less traumatic in making one break and walk out then. Because there is one break, we move on with our life instead of every times the abuse happen, you tried to get over it and then happen again and again that you can’t get out. And it is the same for the kid, so that actually the key point for me, the turning points when I realized it” (Line 103- 110, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I got my school friend who stood by me, who understand. But they were oversea, so I share with them either through email or I told them when they came back and I see that they are much more understanding and supportive and they were there.” (Line 139- 142, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“She just gives me a place to sit down and be safe and to have space in my head to think through what to do. They gave us food, shelter. They are very supportive in their community. The church community would come around with toy for xxx. They would give me a listening ear and help up wherever they could. They would take us out to eat or excursion with</p>

	<p>them”. (Line 187-192, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“In spite of what people say, God never condemn me. I think that kept me going, that kept me sane, that kept me with some sense of self-esteem. That God did not condone the abuse and did not blame me and that He is in the midst of hopeless situation, still have hope. So that was what kept me going. I used to go to bible study and that help also. I think it was through the bible study that gives me lots of hope and I read. I knew that there were passages that I read, there was assurance that He is watching over us. That He will take care of His people. And also interesting through the bible study, I came across the passage that said” God said to his people, I hate the man covering himself with violence as with the garment” and that said a lot to me. Because all the while the church condone domestic violence but here God say I hate violence and in fact that came in the same breath as I hate divorce. So to me that was very reassuring”. (Line 457-469, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“one of my friend from the same bible study were one of my friend in school so she was one of the person I could share honestly about the thing. And she was one of those friends who actually supported me through it. Not a lot, I knew she was there, I could ask her to pray. She was there to meet up for lunch, just be friend” (Line 471-475, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“some of the things that really help me to leave was ah, I think for myself is knowing that it is not a selfish thing to leave. That really the child is more traumatized by staying in a broken home and repeated seeing his mother being abused. That was more traumatic than leaving, that was key. Knowing that ah..ah, I think also my faith, my relationship with God, knowing that God would, the impossible for human is not impossible for Him. That he would find a way</p>
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	<p>and give us a hope and hanging on to God's promises. And the reassurance in my heart despite of what people condemn me for that God did not condemn me." (Line 486-494, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>"it was my faith in God also knowing that it was for the best of the child to leave an abusive situation. Friends, friends who understand me, ah, who supported me. And actually my friend went very far, especially my friends who are oversea. Ah my friend in America send me money and she constantly supported me. She would call me up and say you have come a million mile and just really encouraging. Ah..and she was really there. My friend in Australia was really amazing, one of them gave me a place to stay. We stay with her for quite a long time. In fact she says stay as long as you want to." (Line 501-508, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>"Another friend also, she paid for my rent for a year or half amount but it was a huge amount at that time when I didn't have much. And I was struggling financially and that help a lots. She helps with things like mattresses, we didn't have mattresses to sleep on, bed sheets." (Line 517-520, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>"But I think the friends that have stuck by me as family and eventually my family have come around and became very supportive and they have learned to accept it. We just don't talk about going back. They have learnt to accept me and I am still their daughter, still their sister. Eventually, I think my family ahs come around and I have them back. Ah, in fact, my cousin, some of them, even when my parents didn't understand, my uncle stood by me. Ah, my cousin, extended family also means a lot. And friends who have adopted me as family. That also mean a lot". (Line 562-569, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p>
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	<p>“I think without God, I won’t be able to get out of it, without God, I won’t be able to keep my sanity or to have hope. I think I would be crazy”. (Line 648-649, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I think being a Christian, my relationship with God that was the main. That was what kept me sane, ah my time of prayer. There was time at night where I couldn’t sleep because it was so scary, my time of prayer. Those two three am that I would wake up to pray and I know that God is with us” (Line 454-457, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p>
Planning	<p>“ I think against the odd, I try to find way. I try to make it possible because it is so intolerable. So I know in Malaysia I have not much hope. I tried to go to Singapore and I went in May 2005. Actually I went away for a while to hide in a friend’s house”. (Line 180- 183, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“I was purportedly staying with my parents for extended period and my parents help me to keep quiet about it. They were very distressed when I went. When I went, they kept very quiet about this. They didn’t tell him.” (Line 589-591, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“Eventually, regardless of what bad things he says about family, anyway, I brought the child back to visit my parents and established a good relationship with my family. So in spite of his muttering, saying things like “I think those two kids are bad influence on xxx, see , eh is becoming so naughty”. In spite of him saying all these I kept brought him back to visit my family anyway. So I guess to some extent he couldn’t control it. Ah, he would insist that I be home when he’s home. So we’ll do that during the day and we go back before he got home from work”.(Line 594-601, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p>

	<p>“It was at the time between April and December 2005. we were already living partly out at our other apartment. So we were not living at home everyday, it was like half-half kind of thing, half a week here, half a week there”. (Line 604-606, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“So actually when I went in December 2005 to Australia, I had meant to go in middle of December to visit my friend, ar but I pushed in early. Actually right to the end of November lah. something like 30November or 1 December and I told my friend I really scared can I come now and she says come, come ” (Line 268-272, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc).</p> <p>“I went to see the lawyer basically after I have decided to leave. Around April 2005, I went to see her about getting parenting order of the child” (Line 414-416, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc).</p>
Life after	<p>“Ah but I think life is definitely better and definitely happier without him. Because I can goes home and have peace and quiet and no longer subjected to the constant fear of going home, that you never safe anywhere. So I think my mental health is better and I am not as anxious, happier”. (Line 395-398, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“ I am very glad that things have come so far. I think that is the same when I revisit Singapore where I initially tried to get away and the hopelessness then was just enormous that make me realized how far we have come and make me very thankful to God and give me hope for the future. Even though we have obstacles, the God that brought us this far, must surely have a plan for our future”(Line 652-656, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p>

	<p>“I see that God can bring phoenix out of ashes. So then I look at the mess, I think, by ashes it don’t that God has abandon us. For those bit of ashes, thing that didn’t work out, He has got a bigger plan” (Line 658-660, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p> <p>“ Definitely, I think if I stay on, I would have lost my sanity. That’s one reason why I left that I knew I would go. I probably go down hill mentally and would not be able to look after my son(Line 665-667, Lily Interview Transcript commented.doc)</p>
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