

Surviving intimate partner violence: Exploring denial of abuse using Betrayal Trauma Theory

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## ABSTRACT

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of the most salient social problems attributed to the high rate of societal violence in post-apartheid South Africa. My study is based on interviews with women from lower socio-economic areas around Cape Town who have lived under the victimisation of repeated violent abuse by their partners for many years before making a decision to divorce or separate with their partners. The general trend in the scholarship on IPV has been to frame IPV from theoretical orientations that emphasize gender asymmetry and the problem of patriarchal social institutions. The current study takes the explanatory strength of this perspective into account. However, its aim is to incorporate the psychological dimension of the multifaceted problem of IPV by examining retrospectively, the psychological mechanisms that women employed in order to cope with the victimisation of IPV. The study reports that at the core of the experience of living with IPV is the mechanism of denial, which is employed for a range of reasons mainly in order to minimise, and thus to endure the impact of IPV. This is because the woman feels powerless to change the situation or lives with the hope that things will change. This psychological dimension brings back trauma theory into the analysis of IPV. It is suggested that the concept of “betrayal trauma” could be usefully applied to understand the common pattern of denial among the participants in the study.

*List of keywords:* intimate partner violence; purposive sampling; thematic analysis; psychological coping mechanisms; betrayal trauma theory.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS:**

Introduction

Method

Results

Discussion

Conclusion

References

Endnotes

Appendices

**PLAGIARISM DECLARATION:**

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## INTRODUCTION

Intimate partner violence against women is a common health-care issue. Violence against women, whether physical, sexual, and or emotional, is an endemic phenomenon and is generally perpetrated by partners or acquaintances rather than strangers. It occurs in marital and non-marital relationships as well as in same-sex relationships (Carlson, 2005). Intimate partner violence has both long-term and immediate negative health consequences for abused women and can manifest as poor health status, poor quality of life, and high use of health services, even after they have left their abusive partners (Campbell, 2002; Campbell et al., 2002).

The motivation for conducting a qualitative study that explores the experiences of female survivors of intimate partner abuse is shaped and influenced by my personal experiences, values, and background (coming from a low-socio-economic status, and rural area). I have often witnessed men attacking women in public where I grew up. These experiences influenced my choice of topic in that I wanted to understand how abused women cope with repeated violence in their intimate relationships, the impediments that contribute to women remaining in such relationships and the factors that would enable them to escape the abuse. I find that many people in my community often criticise women for remaining with their abusive partners for years with a preoccupation of the question “why doesn’t she leave him”. In response to this, Platt, Barton and Freyd (2009) say that such a question overlooks the energy and resilience required simply to endure and acknowledge an abusive situation. Debates on the question of why women continue to stay in abusive relationships have dominated the scholarship in this area (Dutton & Painter, 1981; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Gelles, 1976; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998; Taylor, 2002; Walker, 1978). Thus, an examination of the factors that enable abused women to leave their abusive partners will also be considered, because it would inform us what we as bystanders can do to help these women in our communities (Parker, 2005).

From a theoretical perspective, the rationale for conducting a qualitative study with women who have experienced violence in their intimate relationships is that psychological literature on domestic violence against women has grown exponentially since the 1980s campaign to recognize the existence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in female victims of domestic abuse. There is evidence, mainly from media reports, that domestic violence against women by their intimate partners is a serious problem in South Africa because it has severe

physical and mental health consequences for the women involved (Violence against women in South Africa, 1999). In South Africa, domestic violence as the most prevalent form of violence against women and girls is relatively hidden and ignored (Unicef, 2000).

The aim of my study was to incorporate the psychological dimension of the multifaceted problem of intimate partner violence by examining the following questions:

- What are the psychological mechanisms that women employ to cope with repeated abuse in their relationships?
- What are the survival strategies that women use to cope with the abuse?
- What external and internal resources help women to reach the decision to leave the relationships and how long does it take them before they leave the abusive relationship?
- How might the concept of agency be understood in the context of intimate partner violence?

## **Learned helplessness theory**

Much of the research in the early and late 1970s to the 1990s primarily focused on “why women stay in abusive relationships (Gelles, 1976; Rhodes & McKenzie, 1998). The theory of “learned helplessness” and the “battered women syndrome” proposed by Walker (1984) postulates abused women as passive victims in intimate abusive relationships. The former describes how women perceive their chances of escaping the abusive relationship as impossible and thus, learn helplessness and the latter pathologies women as being mentally ill for remaining in the abusive relationship. As Walker (1984, p. 1) puts it: “women develop a cluster of psychological sequela from living in the violent relationship.” This sequela that abused women are likely to develop when experiencing repetitive abuse includes psycho-physiological stress, lowered self-esteem and learned helplessness. These above are some of the factors that undercut motivation to leave the abusive relationship (Dutton & Painter, 1993). Interestingly, the factors that underlies abused women’s motivation focus on the characteristics of the women, without taking into an account how external factors could also influence or constrain abused women’s chances of escaping from the abuse. Thus, one of the aims of my study is to examine what the factors were that enabled the nine women in my study to leave their abusive relationships, because as we have seen the question of why women remain with their abusive partners has been borne out in the literature of domestic violence.

## **Critique of the learned helplessness theory**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, qualitative research studies that have been conducted with abused women have challenged passive views of women. Such research attempted to explore the active coping mechanisms that women employed to resist violence from their abusive partners (Boonzaier & de La Rey, 2003; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Hage, 2006; Taylor, 2002).

In the 1970s until the late 1980s, Walker’s theory has dominated understandings of why women remain in their abusive relationships. The learned helplessness theory advocates a view of a passive woman who endures the abuse portraying abused women as having something internal (e.g. masochistic needs) that makes them want to be abused. It assumes that violence is necessary to fulfill the masochistic needs of the wife but also to maintain the relationship. In

addition, Walker's theory placed much emphasis on what is wrong with abused women in attempts to understand why women remain in abusive relationships. The theory presents women, not as agents, but as helpless victims.

Other criticisms directed at the learned helplessness theory, in addition to the name of the theory that is not very specific to how abused women really react to abuse with coping responses, is that there are not many effective reactions available to women that will protect them and their children from the abusive partner's non-negotiable requests (Walker, 2009). Many professionals who have worked with abused women did not like the implications of the term: learned helplessness, because it suggests that abused women are helpless and passive. The term also dismissed all the many brave attempts and protective actions women take to cope with their partner's violent behavior (Gondolf, 1999 as cited in Walker, 2009, p. 14).

### **Issue of agency**

#### *Changing consciousness*

Boonzaier and de La Rey (2003) conducted narrative interviews with women to explore the meaning that they give to their experiences of intimate partner violence. Their research suggests that at times, women fluctuate between conforming to and resisting dominant cultural constructions of femininity. In addition, economic issues shaped the women's narratives and the women's capacity to negotiate power in their stories. Lastly, they talk about "changing consciousness" that enabled women to reduce the impact of their abusive partners in their lives. Women's roles fluctuated between victimhood and positions of empowerment in their relationships (Boonzaier & de La Rey, 2003).

### **Resources found in the literature that helped women to leave their abusive partners**

Since the late 1990s, many studies that were conducted have presented evidence that not all abused women are helpless. For example, Taylor (2002) conducted an ethnography study to investigate how a sample of twenty-one Black women, who had survived intimate partner abuse, was able to disengage/terminate the abusive relationship. Her findings demonstrates the significant role played by social support that abused women can provide each other, which



increase the likelihood of them leaving their abusive relationships. In Few and Bell-Scott's study (2002), women employed various psychological coping strategies such as keeping personal journals to express their confusion about what the abuse are doing to them, their anger and heartbreak. This helped them to cope with the abuse in that they were able to express their feelings of their experiences of abuse. It also helped them to recognize that the abuse as wrong and that they are undeserving of the abuse.

In the same vein, Hage (2006) interviewed six African American women. The women in her study were faced with a double burden, as women of color as well as being marginalized in society. Despite these circumstances, they still managed to survive these traumatic situations of being abuse in their intimate relationships. These women used active coping strategies such as social support resources to maintain their sense of self and agency under the conditions of abuse. Rather than perceiving their chances of escaping the abuse as impossible, some abused women use their spirituality such as having faith in a higher power as well as adopting an active prayer life as an alternative to cope with the abuse until they eventually leave their abusive partners (Campbell, Miller, Cardwell & Belknap, 1994, as cited in Rhodes & Mckenzie, 1998).

The above studies show that when women have supportive resources, they are capable to, and can leave abusive relationships. These studies portray women as active and strong survivors of abuse. This is in sharp contrast with earlier theories such as Walker's (1984) learned helplessness theory that portrayed women as passive victims of the abuse that they experienced. The studies cited concerning the literature on resources (social support, psychological coping mechanisms, reading self-help books and spirituality) placed much emphasis on the issue of agency, with agency suggesting some form of control, that helped women to leave their abusive partners. However, it lacks sufficient attention to the trauma component that victims of domestic violence often experience. Thus, it gives me the opportunity to examine the trauma that abused women suffer as a consequence of being abused by someone they once viewed as their closest companion. It would be useful to explore in what way the trauma of domestic abuse or intimate partner violence might influence the decision-making capacity of victims/survivors.

There is evidence that experiences of abuse in intimate relationships, has several consequences on the women, such as psychological, physical as well as emotional effects. Thus, it is therefore imperative that we explore the literature on trauma if we are to comprehend the effects of intimate partner violence on women, both during and beyond the abuse, experienced in such relationships.

### **Trauma theories**

The betrayal trauma theory proposes that victims' economic and/or emotional dependency on abusive partners often leads to "betrayal blindness" In other words, in order to maintain the connection with an abusive partner, victims have to be "blind" to the abuse and ignore it for their survival. Trauma is regarded as the shock to the psyche that leads to dissociation (Birrell & Freyd, 2006). Dissociation then is our ability to separate ourselves from parts of ourselves, to create a split within ourselves so that we can know and also not know what we know, to feel and yet not feel our feelings. Those traumas that involve betrayal cut us off from connection with others and even a basic sense of "being" within ourselves (Birrell & Freyd, 2006). There is evidence in the literature that all forms of violence, abuse, and oppression can have traumatic effects (Birrell & Freyd, 2006). However, the authors argue that traumas that occur in the light of interpersonal relationships can be particularly devastating because of the betrayal involved in the violation of basic assumptions of interpersonal and social relationships (Birrell & Freyd, 2006).

This is precisely what Janoff-Bulhan (1992) argues in his theory of shattered assumptions. Assumptions such as *the world is benevolent*, *the world is meaningful* and *the self is worthy*, are shattered. Thus, this known assumptive world of individuals is suddenly and powerfully threatened such as being abused by someone you love. These are times marked by trauma. Trauma is defined as something that is out of the ordinary; directly experienced; and threatens an individual's survival (Janoff-Bulhan, 2002).

When an intimate partner abuses a woman, she experiences a devastating betrayal committed by someone she once may have viewed as her closest companion. In addition, she may be further betrayed when the institutions and communities she turns to for support fail to validate her experience of abuse and fail to provide access to necessary resources in order to assist her in escaping the abuse (Platt, Barton & Freyd 2009). To begin to understand how

difficult it is for domestic violence victims to leave a relationship characterised by betrayal, the authors argue that it is crucial to listen to what victims and survivors have to say. My qualitative study will grant women the opportunity to share their stories of IPV in an atmosphere that is empathic and judgmental.

According to Van der Kolk (1989, p. 393) “traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat.” Trauma can thus be regarded as the rupture of the ego’s protectional fabric. This may explain why abused women often feel helpless in their abusive relationships, which can be regarded as a normal human response to traumatic experiences, especially when such traumatic events occurs over a long period of time (Zepf & Zepf, 2008, p. 336). A traumatic experience such as being abused by an intimate partner may be regarded as an external event, but they quickly become incorporated into the minds of individuals. Bloom (1999, p. 2), illustrates the implications of the internalization of such external events in the following quote: “A traumatic experience such as being abused in an intimate relationship, impacts on the entire person- the way we think, the way we learn, the way we remember things, the way we feel about ourselves, the way we feel about other people and the way we make sense of the world are all profoundly altered by traumatic experiences”.

The majority of studies cited in the review of the literature are studies that have been conducted in Europe, America and elsewhere, with the minority of studies conducted in South Africa (Boonzaier & de La Rey, 2003; Few & Bell-Scott, 2002; Hage, 2006; Taylor, 2002). I recruited women from low socio-economic status within a South African context. The reason behind this is to investigate if abused women in South Africa from the lower strata of society, who are not always in a position to exercise control over their situations as they face various challenges both economic as well as social (being marginalized in society), are also able to display agency when experiencing abuse in their intimate relationships.

## METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

### Qualitative research design

Ethical clearance was received from the department of psychology to conduct my study. The purpose of my qualitative study is to explore the experiences of women who have been abused in their intimate relationships. The aim of my study was to incorporate the psychological dimension of the multifaceted problem of intimate partner violence by examining the following questions:

- What are the psychological mechanisms that women employ to cope with repeated abuse in their relationships?
- What are the survival strategies that women use to cope with the abuse?
- What external and internal resources help women to reach the decision to leave the relationships and how long does it take them before they leave the abusive relationship?
- How might the concept of agency be understood in the context of intimate partner violence?

Qualitative research is concerned with the quality, nature and meaning of human experiences. In a qualitative research design, the emphasis is on meaning as well as understanding (Draper, 2004). According to Willig (2001), a qualitative research design produces (subjective) descriptions or explanations that can answer my research questions. It is here that I find it worthwhile to distinguish why a quantitative research design is not suited to address my research questions. Although quantitative research studies also analyses words, the focus is on quantifying the meaning of the data by looking at the statistical significance of the data (objective), because such an analysis is based on statistical information. A qualitative design will highlight how individuals make sense of the world and how they experience event, such as being in an abusive relationship (Willig, 2001). This creates an opportunity to appreciate the subjective experiences

of participants and by exploring information that is not easily accessible otherwise (Power, 2002).

### *Phenomenological approach*

By using a phenomenological approach, my study will describe the meanings that the abused women attach to their experiences of abuse. The nature of the research questions will be addressed by eliciting the stories of the women who have lived the phenomena of being abused in an intimate partner. The principle of using a phenomenological approach is to enter fully, through written descriptions, into the situations and circumstances of the women who participated in my study (Creswell, 2007).

Thus, a qualitative research design rooted in a phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study.

## **Participants**

### *Purposive sampling*

This form of sampling is one of the most common sampling techniques used for conducting qualitative research (Spradley, 1979). In my study, the most informative group of women were selected from an organization called Sisters for Sisters based in Cape Town. All the women are survivors of abuse and started the organization themselves. Thus, they were able to reflect on what factors led them to leave; how they were able to cope psychologically with repeated abuse in their intimate relationships as well as reflecting on the impediments in the relationships. The workshops are structured in such a way to encourage voluntary sharing of stories, which is viewed as a healing process. All the women expressed that they were grateful for the opportunity to talk about their experiences of abuse as well as promoting awareness of violence against women through their membership of their organisation. Thus, the implication of using this strategy of sampling is that it will yield valid findings of the narratives of abused women, while at the same time contributing to the literature in the field of domestic violence (Marshall, 1996).

### *Criteria for selection*

Eligibility for participation included being a female survivor of heterosexual intimate partner abuse between the ages of 25-40. There was no age restriction of the participants selected, however, women between the ages of 25-40 were given preference, in order to investigate the multiple factors that played a role in the decision to leave. For instance, the decision to leave an abusive relationship for a woman who has children, may be different from that of a woman who has no children. In addition, older women may also contribute to the depth of an understanding of women who would remain for years in abusive relationships. The women selected for participation in the study also needed to have a basic level of competency in English in order to read, write and express themselves during the interview. These women have a low-socio-economic status in South Africa. The reason behind this is to examine whether women with a low-economic status are able to exercise agency concerning their decision to leave an abusive relationship.

### *Sample size*

Nine women were recruited for my study. The small number of women selected for my study is due to the extensive and in-depth data materials that need to be analyzed in examining a phenomenon in depth (Meyers, 2000). In addition, Smith, Harre, and van Langenhove (1995) recognise that an attempt is usually made to understand a relatively small number of women's own frames of the abuse they have experienced, rather than trying to test a preconceived hypothesis on a large sample.

## **Data collection procedures**

### *Semi-structured interviews*

I have used semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. I was interested in exploring the nine women's narratives of their experiences of IPV. The interview seeks qualitative knowledge expressed in normal language, rather than quantification. (Kvale, 2006). Thus, the women can describe as precisely as possible what they have experienced and felt both during and beyond their experiences of abuse. By conducting a qualitative interview, my goal was to understand the individual experiences of each of the women who endured the abuse until eventually leaving their abusive partners. A semi-structured interview is the most common way of collecting phenomenological information. It provides the flexibility to follow the participant's lead. It may also open up the possibility to ask questions and respond further to each of the women's responses in an effort to enhance the details of a woman's story (Watson, 2009).

### *Preparation for data collection*

To make the interview setting more comfortable between myself and each woman, my supervisor recommended that I attend several workshops held by the women so as to interact with them in order to establish rapport before conducting the actual interviews. The procedure, the participants' role in the research process and details of how and where the interview will be conducted were provided. I had to select a location that was free from distractions. I also had to consider the environment in which the women felt comfortable in sharing their stories. I was offered a room at the Anglican Church in Woodstock where the women regularly held their workshops on Saturdays. Thus, the location was familiar and safe to the women. The women were provided with local transportation money to facilitate the interview process.

### *Interview Questions*

Each woman was asked to partake in a single interview that lasted approximately two hours. The interview questions were constructed to capture the lived experience of each woman through open-ended, descriptive questions, which inquire about IPV. Each woman was asked to sign a consent form (See appendix A) before proceeding with the interview. Questions included in the interview covered a range the following themes (See appendix B):

- Participant's background information
- Nature of the relationship
- Nature and experiences of the abuse
- Turning points
- Current relationship
- Conclusion

Each woman has also been given the time and space to speak freely, for example, many women talked about they miss their children who live with their mothers in their home country, while carefully guiding the conversation to explore their experiences of IPV. This facilitated empathy as well as rapport with the women because it showed them that I am not just interested in their stories of abuse, but also other aspects of their lives that are comforting (Smith et al, 1995). Debriefing was done at the conclusion of each interview. This provided an opportunity for each woman to reflect on the interview process and add information that may not have been covered adequately during the interview. The data collected will provide access to unique descriptions of mental life beyond any previous knowledge or preconceptions (Wertz, 2005).

### *Recording the interviews*

Permission was requested to record the interviews from all the women before the interviews began.



*Observation*

The interviews were conducted in person on a face-to-face basis. This granted me the opportunity to make notes on the women's body language, facial expressions as well as emotional reactions to the interview material while interacting with them.

## Data Analysis

### *Narrative analysis and thematic analysis*

I chose the narrative and thematic analysis. In narrative analysis, participants are able to emphasize different aspects of their experiences of abuse. This marks the construction of subjectivity. During the research process, agency is restored to the participants. The women selected and organized those aspects of their experiences of abuse that they feel is important while allowing the researcher to capture the meanings of their responses (Parker, 2005).

Thematic analysis, which offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data, involved the following steps Braun & Clarke (2006, p. 87):

- I had to familiarised myself with the data that collected by reading and re-reading it. I transcribed the data myself.
- I generated my initial codes to allow for patterns to be identified.
- I started searching for themes. This involved transforming codes into potential themes by gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
- I needed to review the themes that I have analyzed so far. This was done ensure the appropriateness to the data, the literature and the research questions.
- I defined and named the themes.
- I have produced the report. It was in this final step that I had to make a selection of vivid compelling extract examples relating it back to the research question and the literature to produce a scholarly report of the analysis.

At this point, it is important for me to acknowledge my own theoretical positions and values in relation to qualitative research. I cannot perceive “themes emerging from the data” as a passive account of the process of analysis. It will deny my active role as the researcher who plays a role

in both identifying and selecting patterns/themes that are of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, I considered my identity in relation to the research conducted. The themes are documented in the Results and Discussion section.

## **RESULTS**

This study is based on interviews with women who have experienced intimate partner violence and who joined a women's support group after leaving their abusive relationships. In this section, I will present the results of the study based on the themes that were drawn from the interview data. The results will be presented thematically and organised according to the four main areas that the study explored: (i) the psychological mechanisms that the women employed to cope with their abuse; (ii) the survival strategies; (iii) the external and internal resources that helped the women leave their abusive relationships; and (iv) how the concept of agency was reflected in the women's narratives.

In the next section, themes that relate to psychological coping mechanisms will be presented and discussed. There were significant differences in each of the woman's narratives of abuse by their intimate partners. However, a collective set of themes were identified that illustrate how women often employed certain psychological strategies in order to cope with the abuse by their partners. The main insight that emerged in relation to the question of psychological coping mechanism is that the women in the study experienced the abuse by their partners as a betrayal of trust. The mechanism of denial has been found to be a central feature of the experience of what has come to be known as "betrayal trauma" (Platt et al, 2009). In this study, I have drawn from the work of (Birrell & Freyd, 2006; Platt, et al, 2009) who has applied the theory of betrayal trauma to explain some of the psychological mechanisms that have been identified as coping mechanisms in abused women. Results of this study show similar patterns, and in particular, the psychological mechanism of denial was a common response among the women studied. Denial may be understood as an adaptive dissociative response similar to that described in betrayal trauma theory (Birrel & Freyd, 2006). In the following excerpts from the interview transcripts, the participants describe responses that suggest psychological denial.

### **HOW WOMEN COPE WITHIN THE ABUSE**

#### **Denial as a Psychological Strategy**

The denial that the women showed was often influenced by the repeated promises that the women's partners made about changing their behaviour. The fact that the women believed these

promises even though nothing changed over time suggests that they *wanted* to believe the promises, and therefore did not allow themselves to see the evidence of the deception in their partners' promise. This sense of denial is reflected in the following responses.

Participant two said:

*‘I am going to change, I am going to be a good husband’, “so I keep those words in mind. So, even the time I go back, my parents said no he is not going to change and then I said no, he told me that he is going to change. Those words they make me to go back to him”.*

Participant nine said:

*“I started to pack today and go back home then today comes and he come with a different story and then I think, let me just stay this time”.*

Participant three said:

*“Along the way I would think that maybe it might be good for me to leave, but then he would do something sweet and then I’ll forgive him”.*

Participant two said:

*“I think for three years it was, pretending, in my heart he wasn’t there, to do the duties for the wife, to wash his clothes, to cook, to sleep with him in the same bed I was doing that”.*

## **Religious beliefs**

Another type of denial adopted by abused women is the appeal to higher loyalties such as religious beliefs that helped women to cope with the abuse. Five of the women spoke about this protective factor as a significant resource that helped them to cope with the abuse.

Participant four said:

*“Me I usually pray, pray, pray, though I’m not a church goer, I prayed”.*

Participant six said:

*“In my mind I was saying maybe there will be a time when he will be just stop or a changed person. I was sort of thinking, I was even going to church, even praying like he is going to change. I had hope in my heart like he will change and I so hope again, he is my husband and he is going to change”.*

Participant seven said:

*“You have to wait, wait to see if there’s something can be changed, for example, I get saved and then I begin to pray, and I was waiting that perhaps God can change him..., when you pray, you trust God that God is can do something”.*

Participant eight said:

*“I am a Christian. I would go to church and I would spend most of my time doing church activities. I was just hoping that one day this man will stop drinking and maybe he will come also to church and then he will be a good man, like other good man”.*

Participant nine said:

*“I used to pray too much. I used to go to church and do all things, that’s why I waited for those, two and a half, three months to see if things would changed”.*

Many domestic violence victims adapt to or develop defense mechanisms such as denial and sublimation to cope with the abuse over time or defend against these harms by directing the cause of their partners’ abusive behaviour onto something else. Two women often addressed alcohol as the cause of their abusive partners’ behaviour.

Participant one said:

*“To me the main thing that was causing a problem in our home, the alcohol. So, I knew that the moment he stops drinking, things would be fine. So I was looking at it as the issue that I was addressing and the issue that his mother always talking about is: “oh if he stops drinking”.*

*“I was just hoping that one day this man will stop drinking and maybe he will come also to church and then he will be a good man, like other good man”.*

Some women turned to friends who also experienced abuse in their relationships. Although the women deemed their friends helpful in attempts to cope with the abuse, they could not offer problem-solving skills in order to escape the violence in their lives. Women draw on maladaptive coping mechanisms such as drinking in order to self-medicate.

Participant one said:

*“They [friends] said no but you should have your own life you know, if he goes out drinking, why don't you drink. So, I would sit with them and then they would put some little bit of it and then I drink..., I wasn't just drinking in a social way, but I think I was like really going overboard, drinking to get drunk and my body could not cope with it, drinking beer and drinking whiskey, just getting myself intoxicated with alcohol. If you would tell me “ you need to get out of this relationship and then I don't come close to you, but if you tell me that “ yes, even me, I'm going through it and this is how we deal with it, then I would be friends with you. I felt that they understood me better. I felt the others who would tell me to leave, I felt judged”.*

Participant four said:

*“Sometimes I tell myself [crying], I find that people are coming there like this friend of Nokabongo, they come and see me, because Nokabongo's boyfriend is drinking, I tell myself let me also drink, because I'm not going to the police station, I'm not going to the doctor”.*

In the next section excerpts the interview transcripts, the participants describe responses that illustrate the strategies women employed to survive within the abusive relationship.

### **STRATEGIES WOMEN EMPLOYED TO SURVIVE *WITHIN* THE ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIP**

The responses below reflect agency, but agency not to leave, but rather agency as a strategy to continue living with their partners. Women employed avoidance coping mechanisms, engaged in agentic strategies by thinking about how to manage their violent partners and seek help from the legal system through interventions such as protection orders to help maintain temporary separation from their partners. These are active positions of strategic engagement with their situations.

#### **Avoidance coping mechanisms**

Participant one said:

*“My sisters would come and talk to me in the hospital and say no but if this is not working out, why don’t you just come out of it, but I wouldn’t say anything, because in me I thought that it was something that would finally maybe someday work. So, I think just being in the hospital and my reaction after that I never did anything.” This is something that I did not want to know. This is an area that I didn’t want to really explore”.*

Participant eight said:

*“I would just feel that today something is going to happen and then sometimes I would say, I would just go to bed early, trying to avoid him.. I would prefer to be send out on patrols so that those days I would not be home and then I would come home, maybe after seven days, I would go out patrol and then when I would come home at least I know that time, there weren’t any abuse”.*

#### **Agentic strategies**

Participant three said:



*“Judging from whether he was drunk or whether he was sober, I would decide on whether to answer back with something equally hurtful or to keep quiet. Yes, so I could tell that okay yah, I think if I say this, it will shut him up or better I keep quiet and let him go on and on and then he will stop when he is tired of talking”.*

Participant six said:

*“Other times I wouldn’t even dare to ask him otherwise he would beat me. I was just keeping quiet because when his drunk, when he’s drunk, his behavior you won’t even ask, I would just be quiet”.*

### **Legal system**

Participant five said:

*“I don’t know how it would have ended up if I hadn’t take the protection order, at least the protection order was something that restrained him from doing those things. He couldn’t come to me because I told him; you see, you were not suppose to do this as you were told in court otherwise, I will have to uhmm take you to the police or whatever. So at least that helped”.*

Participant one said:

*“Every time there is police in the house, he has to go and they said that, they kept coming and they said no we can’t keep coming you have got to go to the domestic court and report this”.*

In the next section excerpts the interview transcripts, the participants describe responses that illustrate that the decision to leave their abusive relationships is best understood as a process, rather than a single event.

### **Leaving as a process**

All the women in my study have left their abusive partners, often many times before the final break. Below are some responses of the women.

Participant one said:

*“So, the beginning of 2008 then I started to plan my exit plan which was not easy, because in me now I knew now I have got to end this relationship because things were getting worse, but it was not easy for me to come out and only managed to come out in November in the same year”.*

Participant seven said:

*“Every time I asked God, God why I am like this, my children suffer, we don't eat very good, because he ask me money every time and I must, I have to give it to him, when I refused to give me, he beat me or he do another things which make another things which can make me sick, I don't know, that's why I asked, I decide every day, to go out to go out, but when I prayed I bring back the strength, that's why it takes one year to take that decision”.*

Participant five said:

*“I already decided that I want to leave him way before I actually left him”.*

The first stage has been termed the *turning point*, in other words, an event that causes the woman to reevaluate her relationship and frames it as abusive.

Participant six illustrates this very well:

*“At the end, I think, he was going to do something terrible and now he was like complaining about the gun. Every time when I'm sleeping home I had to like you know you are cleaning, maybe lifting it up or every time I had to touch it, to touch it, to touch the gun, my heart would, when I touched the gun, it would just like and you would think like what about if he's angry and he just take the gun and shoot and I am sleeping, what would, it would, imagine, every day, imagine”.*

During the second stage, the woman *separates* from her partner. Separation may be achieved in multiple ways, such as spending longer times away from home.

Participant eight said:

*“At first, what I did, I just run away from this house and for nine months I go back to my parents’ house”.*

The third stage is when a woman has *ended* the relationship and is actively working to maintain the separation. Participant three talked about how she finally managed to make the decision to leave:

*“The minute that I just said, okay, no, regardless of good nice, how good he is going to be, I want out. I moved jobs and I also moved from where I stayed, because I, knowing him, the way I knew him, he was the kind of person that would force himself”.*

During the *recovery stage*, the woman continues to work toward healing and empowerment. All the women are members of a support group that was established by some of the women themselves. They meet twice every month whereby they tell their stories and support one another. These women uphold strength through unity to move toward a life without their abusive partners. Here are Participant four and Participant seven responses’ respectively:

*“I use to come for every Saturdays, because in townships Saturdays a drinking day, Fridays and Saturdays, so when I joined the organisation, it kept me also out of that thinking of that beer. If I’m in the group, I don’t even think of that frustration, when I even some of the stories of the women, I think also, I am not alone. I’ve just kept me strong by listening also, coming home I just sit with my kids”.*

*“When you are a member of Sisters for Sisters you can talk there, we are people who have the same problem, we can talk about our stories, you see when you talk, there is something in your heart, it can remove something”.*

## EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL RESOURCES THAT HELPED THE WOMEN LEAVE THEIR ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

### External resources

Women sought outside assistance from family or friends, legal resources and obtained support from religious institutions that enabled them to make the transition from victim to survivor of IPV.

#### *Support from friends and family*

Participant one said:

*“Before the violence actually happened, then I would flee...you know, I would take my baby and run away, or when I saw that things were worse I would pack my stuff and I remember a number of times that, you know, I just packed my stuff and went to stay with my sister.., What also helped me a lot is the women in the community, because when we were parting ways, then they were there for me, because in me I felt very, very weak and I felt that I could end it, it was something that I was not able to do”.*

Participant nine said:

*“My brother used to stay near, because we were used to stay in a flat so I was on the second floor and my brother used to stay on third floor. So when I finished doing my work, I used to go and stay with my brother”.*

Participant two said:

*“What I did, I just run away from this house and for nine months I go back to my parents house”.*

### *Church programs and Pastors*

Participant one said:

*“I was sitting in this, uhmm in church, in the leadership course that I was doing just to equip me to do more as I said earlier I wanted to do things in the community, as I was sitting in this training and they were talking about abuse in families and they said that if there is any member or yourself who is being abused, you’ve got to act immediately, you’ve got to really report that to the church and that it is a very serious thing and I looked at the pastor and he turned red and everybody else took this to be very serious and here I am sitting amongst them and I have not confided in any of them that I am being abused”.*

Participant seven said:

*“At that time, when I take that decision, I meet a pastor. He was a pastor from Uganda, coming onto our church to preach in our church. And when he finished he tell Christians to come one by one, to speak to him and that pastor tell me that that husband is not yours. You must leave him, he is not your husband, God doesn’t know him like your husband and I decided to do that”.*

### *Internal resources*

Women’s internal strengths may be associated their strong sense of identity as mothers. This helped women to act on their decision to leave their abusive relationships.

Impact on the children:

Participant one said:

*“It had a very bad impact on them, especially on my son. Because of what was happening at home, then it affected his social life and how he communicates with people. much later now, a few years ago, he wouldn’t, like, talk to people. He would just come from school and he sits wherever he is sitting, if he is eating something, if he is finish eat and then he would leave the cup there and sit and not mix with anyone. And of course, my daughter, she would cry a lot, she would just breakdown at times and she just starts crying”.*

Participant four said:

*“There was no progress for my kids also at school, they repeat same here, same here. Imagine this one she is grade nine and she’s eighteen years old and if there’s reports I must come to meetings” [crying].*

Women’s internal strength as mothers that enabled them to leave their abusive relationships:

Participant four said:

*“So the sake of my kids, I wonder if something happens to me, they are girls, what is going happen to them. So when I look at them, I will think, I will start to tell myself for the sake of my children let me just stop...I will tell myself no, is it because this man oppressed me, I must oppressed my kids, no man, I can’t do that. I love my kids, I must let them laugh. I told myself when I was in that abusive relationship, I’ve told myself I am must be here, I am here to be with my kids, one day things will change, but I was eating the same thing every day, every night, but since I would say that also my kids where my counselors because if maybe I was one of the women who didn’t have kids, I would be sitting in it still”[crying].*

Participant five said:

*“I just felt like, I was being unfair to my son for him to witness this, because I was thinking that I bought this man into his life, he didn’t asked for this and also because I’m the one who left his dad, I felt that he must surely blame me for bringing this onto him that first I leave his dad and now I bring this man into his life and what kind of an example am I setting, yah because I’ve always said that I want to set a good example for my son and I want to show him how to treat his woman right. So it don’t want him to be getting mixed feelings, so ja”.*

Participant one said:

*“He has turned it on the boy, for example he would wake him up one o clock in the night and say it is time for you to go to school and the child would go and look at the wall and*

*it is one in the night and then he starts laughing at him and then the child would get so upset and he doesn't know what to do and then I realized no, I have got to take a step. If I don't take a step and end this relationship, the children are really going to suffer".*

### **THE CONCEPT OF AGENCY IN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF ABUSE**

Women's roles as nurturing and loving that were performed at the beginning of the relationship changed because of their partners' abusive behaviour. This is precisely what three participants' responses' illustrates:

Participant five:

*"I was tolerating it at first and I didn't know exactly what it would get into, at the end, I was thinking okay, this is not what I want myself, I would have wanted a happy marriage you can't force things..., no I don't really need to put myself through that".*

Participant eight:

*"I just made up my mind, that time I just told him that you know you going out and find what you find. So me I am free to do whatever I what to do".*

Participant nine:

*"I came to realized I have been doing too much for this man, because I felt it's like a burden I used to have carrying, really heavy, something on my back, because if everything..., if I have to do anything for that man. I used to do everything, everything, Wash, iron, clothes, shoes, food. He didn't know I can leave. He didn't know, my husband didn't' know I can go. The time I left, he was in shocked".*

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### How women cope within the abuse

The main argument of the betrayal trauma theory is that the victim responds with denial to the abuse because she is dependent on the abuser. In my study, a woman's economic dependency on her partner was another common feature in the responses of the women. According to betrayal trauma theory, the more intimate the relationship with an abusive partner, and the more dependent a woman is on the abusive partner or on the relationship, the more adaptive it is to pay little attention or become "blind" to the abuse and betrayal. In fact, a woman's employment status and income are the strongest factors predicting whether she decides to leave the relationship (Platt, et al, 2009). The women in my study developed defense mechanisms such as denial against the abuse by directing the cause of their partners' abusive behavior onto their partners drinking. In addition, women also adopted another form of denial the appeal to higher loyalties such as religious beliefs that helped them to cope with the abuse (Platt, et al, 2009).

The fact that the women have low-socio-economic statuses, financial difficulties were too overwhelming for them to immediately act on their decision to leave their abusive partners. Thus, denial was an adaptive mechanism in the face of an abuser's betrayal, because in minimizing the risk present, it allows a victim to protect herself against an otherwise intolerable level of fear and threat. Another reason why women were inclined to denial is that domestic violence is one of the most overwhelming types of betrayal an individual can experience (Platt, et al, 2009). Thus, survival sometimes depends or seems to depend on remaining with an abusive partner. In IPV, women risk enduring an increase in the level of abuse because the loss of her partner's financial support for herself and her children and a host of additional difficulties to survival will arise if she fights back or threatens to leave (Platt et al, 2009). Another reason why IPV is one of the most devastating type of betrayal is because women depend on their partners to make them feel safe and cared for. When violence takes place within intimate relationships, victims may find that their intimate partners cannot meet their basic needs for solace, refuge, love, protection, and respect which form the basis of healthy relationships (Platt, et al, 2009).

Some of the women in my study draw on maladaptive coping mechanisms such as drinking in order to self-medicate as a way to cope with the physical pain, depression, fear, anxiety, or otherwise distressing thoughts or memories associated with being abused in their



intimate relationships. This is in line with what betrayal trauma argues; when abuse becomes so serious that it is impossible to ignore, abused women may turn to alcohol and other substances to push the painful thoughts and uncomfortable feelings away. However, this behaviour further weakens the immune system by increasing the severity of the health issues in abused women (Platt, et al, 2009).

### **Strategies used to survive *within* the relationship**

The women described carefully chosen strategies that were aimed at controlling the violence and keep them safe in threatening situations. Women employed avoidance coping mechanisms, engaged in agentic strategies by thinking about how to manage their violent partners and seek help from the legal system through interventions such as protection orders to help maintain temporary separation from their partners. Such responses helped women behave in ways that maintain the relationship rather than in ways that threaten it, fully recognizing the abuse may risk their survival (Birell & Freyd, 2006; Platt et al, 2009). This is particularly the case for women in my study who are faced with a number of stressors and challenges in their lives such as unemployment and poverty.

### **Leaving as a *process***

From the women's responses, leaving is better understood as a process rather than as a single decision and action (Platt, Barton, & Freyd, 2009; Taylor, 2002). According to Barton and Freyd (2009, p. 196) "gathering confidence, enduring and managing the violence, negotiating around control tactics, and acknowledging the abuse to herself and others- each step takes an enormous amount of strength and courage." All the women described overwhelming difficulty in leaving their abusive relationships. Some women had to negotiate their way out of the abusive relationships for a long period, before eventually leaving their abusive partners.

The leaving process started when women realised that they cannot control her partner's behaviour. Some theorists (See Taylor, 2002) identified four stages in the leaving process. Many women returned to their abusive partners before they were able to make a final break. This was because some women had hope that things would work out and or because they feared that they could not make it financially, especially women with children. As we have seen from women's

responses, denial was an adaptive coping mechanism in the face of a partner's betrayal until they are ready to leave for good.

In considering why women often left their abusive partners to go to family members, like in the case of participant one and two, but then return to their partners, may be attributed to the fact that the majority of these women come from lower socio-economic status as well as their financial dependency on their partners. Thus, they risk poverty and homelessness for themselves and her children (Platt, et al, 2009). Their capacity to leave was influenced by material shortages, especially in the case of women who were financially dependent on the father of their children. The reality for the women in my study were that leaving required them have enough money to childcare, and have adequate financial resources to meet daily living expenses for her and the children (Platt et al, 2009). All these factors made separation extremely difficult considering the backgrounds of these women.

### **Strategies that *enabled* women to finally to leave the abusive relationship**

The women in my study sought outside (external) assistance from family or friends, legal resources and obtained support from religious institutions as well as draw strength from their sense of identity as mothers (internal) which in turn enabled them to make the transition from victim to survivor of IPV.

Women turned to their immediate surroundings such as family and friends for support. In this context, family members and friends can be regarded as first responders to IPV. Women's actions are shaped by the responses she gets when she discloses to family or friends. Thus, an appropriate response such as support can give her the strength to leave her abusive partner, and thus, begin the process of change required to heal, like in the case of participant one, nine and two (Platt et al, 2009).

As shown by participant one and seven, religious institutions can also contribute to women initiating the process of eventually leaving an abusive relationship. Discussion groups about domestic violence may be encouragement enough for women to seek help. Platt et al (2009) holds that it is in these larger social contexts that programs can be developed to teach us as bystanders how to react appropriately to women who share information regarding their experiences of IPV. Women's strong sense of identification as mothers also prompted women to leave their abusive relationships (Hage, 2006). Children are often involved under conditions of

domestic violence (Taylor, 2002). The children of the women suffered because of being exposed to violence in the home. Some women broke down in tears when speaking about the affects the abuse had on their children. Women reported that their children's performances at school was affected (participant 4), their social skills in relating to other people (participant 1), while another women ended the relationship in order to interrupt the intergenerational cycle of abuse (participant 5) by leaving her abusive partner and to provide better role models for her son. This gender aspect of their children are particular crucial to consider. For instance, their sons run the risk of thinking that that is the only way of problem-solving, while the girls of the women may think that that is the way a husband behave in marriages. However, the women in my study said that they had conversations with their children about how abuse is wrong and undeserving, while another woman, together with her children, entered into family therapy as a way of working through the trauma.

### **The concept of *agency* reflected in the women's narratives**

We have seen that some of the women identities changed because of their experiences of IPV. Such changes are also present within the literature (de La Rey & Boonzaier, 2003; Kirkwood, 1993; Mills, 1985; Profitt, 2000). These theorists project that women's identities change as they react to violence from their partners. According to de La Rey and Boonzaier, 2003, p. 1026), "Women's resistances, shifting identities, and strategies aimed at dealing with the violence in their lives reject traditional representations of women as passive and helpless". Thus, these changes in women's identities could be positive and allow women to gain control in their relationships like in the case of participant five and eight.

### *Critical summary*

I find it worthwhile to acknowledge that the term "survivor" used in this paper becomes rather problematic, because there are many challenges that exist for women after they have left their abusive partners, such as trying to regain their lives. Women now have to worked towards remaking the self, in order words, work towards healing by reconstruction the internalisation and internal representation of their traumatic experiences of the past, like in the case of women in my study who established/joined a support groups to help them deal with the abuse. This shows that the book of trauma is never closed; it is something that remains unfinished, because the literature

review on trauma has shown that trauma becomes a bludge in the sense of who you are, because of their assumptions being shattered as well as the unmaking of the self. In addition, we have also learnt that victims of trauma's assumptive world have been shattered and thus, experienced a loss of meaning and control in their abusive relationships.

To work towards healing, these women engage in support groups in which they construct a narrative of the trauma experienced, which ultimately could enable them to gain control over their experiences. Survivors of abuse have to redefine their identities. According to Bhavnani and Phoenix (1994), "identity is not one thing for any individual, rather each individual is both located in and opts for a number of differing and at times conflictual identities, depending on the social, political, economic and ideological aspects of their situation" (p. 9). In a similar vein, Brison (2002) who is a survivor of rape argues that the self is fundamentally relational; the self can be remade in connection with others. A psychologist, Judith Lewis Herman notes that a traumatic event is one in which a person feels overwhelmingly helpless in the face of what is perceived to be a life-threatening event (as cited in Brison, 2002). Thus, trauma destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others. Working through trauma can only be done in relation to empathic others such as support groups. In women's workshops, each individual became the container of another woman's story. Brison (2002) says by engaging in a narrative, the survivor takes control over certain aspects of both her story and her memory.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study demonstrates that at the core of the experience of living with IPV is the mechanism of denial, which is adopted for a range of reasons mainly in order to minimise, and thus to endure the impact of IPV. This could be attributed to the fact that woman feels powerless to change the situation or lives with the hope that things will change. The results have been presented thematically and organised according to the four main areas that the study explored: (i) the psychological mechanisms that the women employed to cope with their abuse; (ii) the survival strategies; (iii) the external and internal resources that helped the women leave their abusive relationships; and (iv) how the concept of agency was reflected in the women's narratives. This psychological dimension was incorporated trauma theory into the analysis of IPV. It My study also shown that the concept of "betrayal trauma" could be usefully applied to understand the common pattern of denial among the women in my study.

*Limitations and recommendations for future research*

As we have seen, relying on God served as a protective coping mechanism for the majority of women in my study. Due to the limited scope of this Hons project in terms of the short timeline, I was unable to investigate how women's faith in God was influenced after they have realised that their partner was not going to change his abusive behaviour, despite firm beliefs that God will change their situations for the better. Thus, future research may attempt to explore the link between spirituality and trauma to demonstrate how it influences victims of IPV faith in a higher power.

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## ENDNOTES

The majority of the women in my study's first language is not English, thus there may be some errors in their tenses. I transcribed the interviews verbatim and did not correct such errors.

All the participants names were replaced by "participant" and numbered randomly, according to each women's responses. This was done to protect the women's anonymity.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### **Informed Consent Form for Honours Research Project**

**Title of Study:** A qualitative analysis of narratives of women who have left their abusive relationship.

**Principal Investigator:** Jennifer Hardnek

**Other Investigators:** Prof. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

**Department & Institution:** Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town

#### **Introduction**

*This is one of the Honours research projects in the Psychology Department. You are one of 10 participants selected for this study through the organization Sisters for Sisters based in Cape Town. Please read the information that follows below carefully.*

#### **Participation and Withdrawal**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; however, if at any stage of the study you feel you are unable to continue, you are free to withdraw from it at any stage.

#### **Purpose of this Research Study**

The initial aim of the proposed study is to explore abused women's experiences of abuse in their intimate relationships. The study will examine the factors that enabled you to leave the abusive relationship.

**Procedures**

If you volunteer in this study, you will be asked questions via face-to-face interviews about your experiences of abuse that you experienced in past intimate relationships. These discussions will be audiotape if your permission is granted.

**Possible Risks or Benefits**

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. You may well benefit from sharing your experiences of abuse in an atmosphere that is empathic and non-judgmental. In the event of problems resulting from participation in the study, psychological treatment will be made available for all the women at The Trauma Centre for Victims of Violence in Woodstock.

**Confidentiality**

Your identity in this study will be protected. You are not required to disclose your name in any of the interviews. Your responses to the interview questions will be tape-recorded. However, to protect and ensure confidentiality, your name will not be attached to the audiotape or your demographic information. The descriptions will be written in an unidentifiable manner. After I have transcribed the audiotapes, it will be destroyed. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet. If the data will be reported, it will be presented in a way that preserves your anonymity.

**Available Sources of Information**

If you have any further questions you may contact the Principal Investigator (Jennifer Hardnek), at (c) 076 6529205, and (h) 023 3161561.

**AUTHORISATION**

I have read and understand this consent form, and I would like to participate in this research study.

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Principal Investigator:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### Qualitative Interview Guide

*Member of Sisters for Sisters from Woodstock or Ocean View:* \_\_\_\_\_

#### Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. As we have discussed, I will be recording your interview and writing a few notes so that I can be sure that I am getting everything you say. As it was stated in the consent form, you may withdraw from the study at any time. I will be asking you some questions, and will begin with some demographic information. The rest of the questions will focus on your experience with intimate partner abuse as well as the factors that enabled you to leave the relationship.

#### Participant's Background Information

1. Please tell me your age.
2. What is your nationality?
3. Do you have any children?
  - (If so): What are their ages?
  - Are they boys or girls? (If appropriate) Or male/female?
4. When did you join Sisters for Sisters?
5. And before that? Is there any other organisation that you went to before you joined Sisters for Sisters and after you left your marriage/relationship?

## Nature of the Relationship

*I am now going to ask you questions about the nature of your relationship:*

6. Was the man who was abusive to you the father of your children?
7. What was the nature of your relationship with him? Were you married, were you partners?
8. How long were you married [or did you live as partners together]?
9. Could you describe some of your good memories of your relationship with your husband/partner?
  - (If appropriate) Is there any moment in the years you were together that you could identify as a turning point, that is, when things changed in your relationship?
  - To what would you attribute this change?

## Nature and Experiences of the Abuse

*I would like you to tell me about your experiences of abuse in your relationship*

10. Describe your experiences of abuse in your relationship. I would like you to describe in detail how your husband/partner behaved when he was abusive.
11. Were there moments when you felt you *knew* that your husband/partner was going to be abusive?
  - (If appropriate) What were the signs that you noticed? Did you feel anything in your body, some kind of premonition? If so, please describe this feeling in detail.
  - How did you respond to these signs?
  - In other words, did you develop any strategies of dealing with the abuse over time?
12. Did your children witness the abuse? If so, please try to describe your feelings when you watched your children watching your husband/partner being abusive to you?

13. Looking back to those years when you were in the abusive relationship, how would you describe yourself *then*?

### **Turning Points**

14. Are there moments when you felt you wanted to leave? Describe those moments.

- (If appropriate) What prevented you from leaving?
- Are there moments when you left and then returned? What made you return?

15. What was the last straw that broke the camel's back?

- Is there a moment you consider to have been a turning point for you, that made you leave?
- Did the idea of leaving your husband/partner develop over time?
- What do you consider to have made it possible for you to get to that point where you were able to consider leaving him a possibility?
- What do you consider to have been factors that finally enabled you to take that step?
- Where did you go?

16. It has been ----- years now since you left your relationship. How would you describe your life now?

- How would you describe yourself now?
- You have been with Sisters for Sisters for ----- years. What does the organisation mean for you?
- In what ways did the experience of abuse change you?

17. Looking back at the abusive relationship with your husband/partner, what have you learned about yourself from those years? If you were to turn back the clock, what would you change?

### **Current relationship**

18. Are you involved in a relationship currently?

- How does this relationship compare with the one you left?

- What is your relationship with your husband/partner now?
- Are you divorced? Are you still in contact with him?
- Where are your children?

### **Conclusion**

19. Is there anything you would like to tell me?

**Thank you so much for your time!**