

## **REBUILDING LIVES AFTER DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: UNDERSTANDING LONG-TERM OUTCOMES**

**Abrahams, H. (2010), London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers. pp.208 (pbk)  
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This newly published book by Hilary Abrahams makes a very distinctive contribution to the growing literature on victims of domestic violence with the following claim:

*This is the first study since the late 1970s to follow women from the refuge into their new lives, and the only one to cover such an extended period[...]It is unique in offering contemporary factual evidence on the long-term effects of domestic violence and abuse and of women's needs in areas such as housing, health and employment. (p.1-2)*

Not only does this book deliver on this assertion but it also bears testament to the fortitude and courage of the women who participated in the study, as well as offering practical guidance and insights for those who work directly, or indirectly, with victims of domestic violence.

The research consisted of interviewing 22 women who had previously been involved in two earlier enquiries; these previous studies looked at the immediate consequences on those who had just left an abusive relationship. The research methods and practical, as well as the ethical, issues are clearly explained in detail in the appendices. It is noted that, although there were differences in the respective women's experiences, they were united by shared experiences. Moreover, Abrahams counters any criticism which could be made that these particular experiences lack broader relevance by making links with wider research findings. However, it is significant that the individual experiences are privileged over and above the more general findings, as some of the aims of the book are to celebrate the achievements of the women involved in the study and provide inspiration for others.

Chapter One looks at the issues related to how and why women leave abusive relationships. It highlights that women experience low self-esteem and 'diminishing horizons', which can restrict their options. It also makes links with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and charts the difficulties of meeting these needs. In regards to theoretical developments, this study is not ground-breaking, but the chapter comes into its own in relating this to the women's own experiences of leaving home and seeking a new life. It vividly highlights the pervasive emotional ambivalence around leaving an abusive relationship. It lucidly conveys the emotional enormity at stake in deciding to leave the home and offers a robust challenge to the question 'why don't they just leave?'. The chapter ends with a summary of the key points, which lends itself ideally for training purposes.

The later chapters follow a similar structure and pattern: a general introduction to the topic, the foregrounding of the experiences of the participants, and a summary of the general points. Chapter Two identified the practical as well as the emotional obstacles to

be addressed in the pursuit of a new home and Chapter Three leads onto the significance of establishing various support systems for both short-term and long-term needs. What is interesting to note in this section is how favourably police intervention has been appreciated in comparison with other agencies. It stands in positive contrast to previous research findings and may be indicative of improved developments in police training and practice.

Chapter Four examines how the women began to fashion links within the community and establish new social ties and Chapter Five identifies how this moves into 'managing a new life'. This particular section brings home the long-term consequences of abuse as a significant number of women have to (re)learn what it means to exercise a greater degree of independence and autonomy. It is in this section that the attempt for some women to enter an educational environment is recorded. It is a salutary message as it is identified as one of the most obdurate of obstacles they face. It is even more concerning as these difficulties were encountered prior to the current cuts in higher education funding.

Chapters Six and Seven, respectively, identify the significance of the women's health and overall well-being, both for themselves and their children. This highlights some interesting points, for example, in regards to health, it identified the multiple and complex needs the participants still had to contend with long after leaving their abusive relationships. In connection with their well-being, for the majority of the women this was inextricably bound-up with caring for their children as their sense of motherhood was easily the most dominant aspect of their life.

The final two chapters record the experience of participating in the study which encompasses both the existential/internal changes, as well as the practical developments. The final chapter arguably brings together the central thread which runs throughout the entire book: it offers a 'message of new life' as it stands as a testament to women as survivors. In rebuilding their lives as well as providing guidance for those who are directly experiencing such abuse, and for those who are in a position to assist.

In conclusion, although this book does not offer any new theoretical insights into the experience of domestic abuse, it does provide a better understanding of the long-term needs and experiences of victims. Moreover, it provided practical and challenging advice for other agencies to try and meet these needs. As is made clear in the introduction, the aims of this research had three aspects:

*to identify the needs of women after leaving the refuge, help to identify any gaps in service provision and assist the development of services structured to meet the long-term needs of women and their families. (p.12)*

It also seeks to make a simple but very powerful and important point, that it is more cost-effective in the long-term to provide some support, usually at a 'low level', than to provide no support at all. The untended long-term problems can, and do, result in far greater social costs. This point has taken on far greater significance at the time of completing this review because the cuts in service provision to support woman who are abused have

become so severe it has prompted Denise Marshall, Chief Executive of the Eaves charity, which supports women who have been abused, to return her OBE in protest at the reduction in funding. How workers can meet this in the light of the austerity measures being imposed on these services is, arguably, the subject of another study.

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