

# "Leaving is just the start of ending the relationship": Understanding women's decision-making post- separation from an abusive spouse

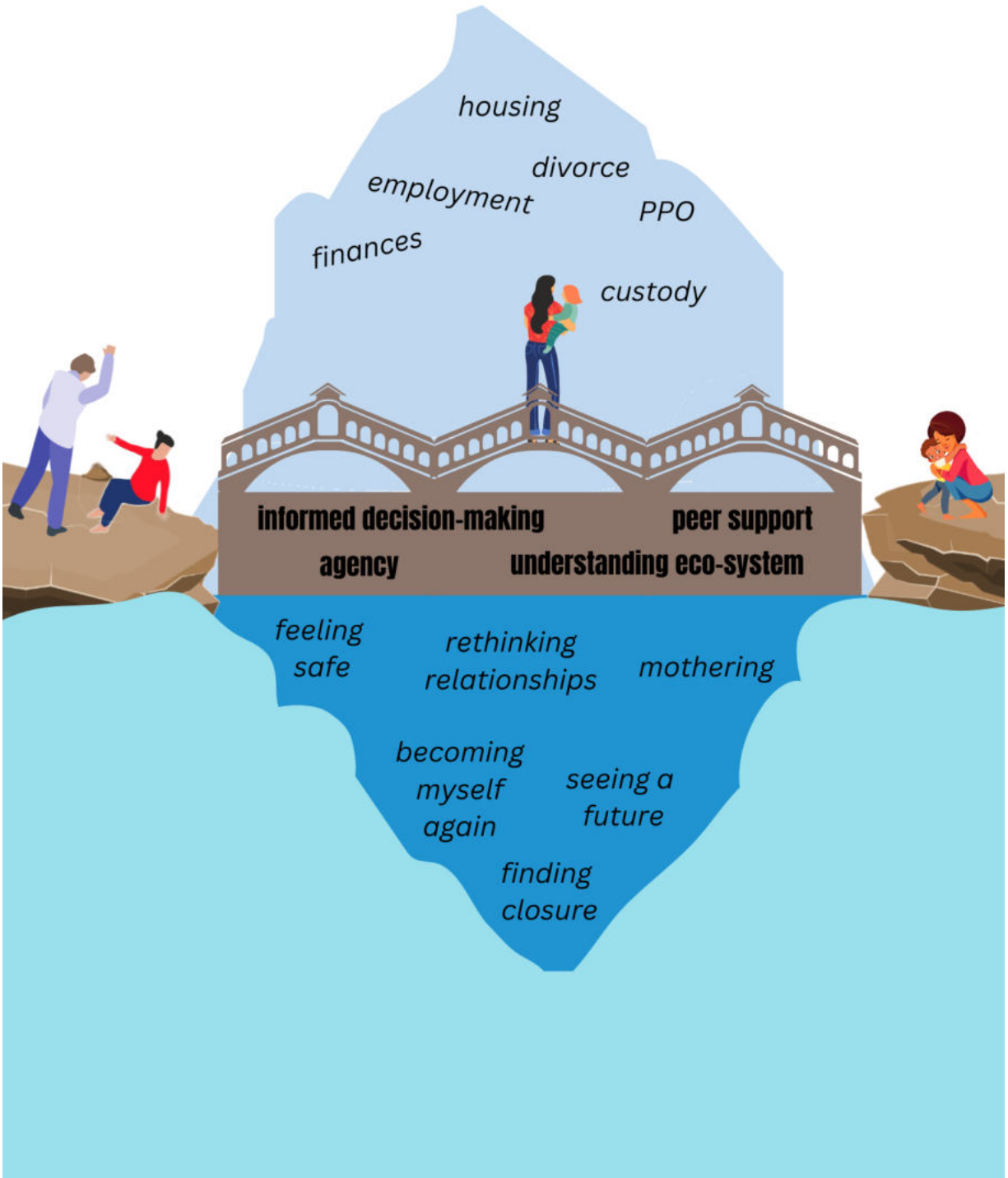
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The **Singapore Institute of Technology** is Singapore's first University of Applied Learning, offering specialised degree programmes that prepare its graduates to be work-ready professionals. With a mission to develop individuals and innovate with industry to impact the economy and society in meaningful ways, SIT aims to also be a leader in innovative workplace learning and applied research. Assistant Professor Ingrid Wilson is a domestic violence researcher and faculty member of the Health and Social Sciences Cluster of the Singapore Institute of Technology.

**Care Corner Project StART** is one of the two Protection Specialist Centres in Singapore that provides integrated services for individuals and families affected by the issues of family violence and sexual assault. Through the promotion of safe interactions and healthy relationships between individuals and working with community partners and families to strengthen relationships that nurture trust, resilience and respect, CCPS's aim is to cultivate a society free from family violence. Ms. Valencia Ng and Ms. Charissa Quek are Social Workers at CCPS with experiences in supporting and journeying with individuals and families experiencing domestic violence.

We would like to acknowledge the courageous women who so generously shared their lived experience of family violence and the challenges they faced in the transition to safety and life post-separation.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The decision to leave an abusive relationship is a significant decision not taken lightly. However, contrary to societal perceptions, the post-separation transition is far from simple. Women often face ongoing abuse from an ex-spouse, and the process of achieving a new life post-separation is a complex process involving many decisions which require weighing up competing interests. In this context, women may make decisions which may be perceived as not in their best interests or at odds with expectations of those in the support ecosystem.

To date, much focus has been on women's decision-making processes to leave abusive relationships, however, less is known about the decisions women make and their decision-making processes in the post-separation stage. Such decision-making involves many considerations and consequences. Using qualitative interviews and focus groups with clients from Care Corner Project StART who had decided to leave the abusive relationship, this research study aims to explore the decisions women make post-separation, what influences these decisions, and the role of formal and informal support.

## KEY FINDINGS

This study found that physically leaving an abusive relationship is the start of a complex and challenging period for women as they journey to a life free from violence. Key findings from our research are:

- The post-separation period is characterised by unknown and uncertainty. Women had little awareness of what was involved after physically separating from an abusive spouse, which may account for women's ambivalence about leaving.
- In the post-separation period, women are faced with a range of complex, external processes, and decision points along the post-separation journey. Key decisions centre around protection from further abuse and whether to obtain a PPO, proceeding with divorce and custody, parenting, financial stability, employment, and housing. Some processes can take many years.
- The environment in which women make decisions is characterised by instability as women's housing, employment and financial situation is often tenuous with some women leaving with very limited means.
- For some women, post-separation abuse continues in different forms, particularly negotiations with their ex-spouses to achieve a resolution through protracted court processes. The lack of material resources played a significant role as a factor in women's decision-making, for example whether to pursue entitlements or enforce actions in the courts.
- Women's decision-making is underpinned by important internal considerations. Women seek physical and emotional safety, finality and closure especially when pursuing divorce and custody processes. Mothering and the welfare of their children is central to women, even though some decisions may appear inconsistent to the outsider. Women were clear

that the benefits of being out of the abusive relationship for themselves and their children, outweighed the significant challenges they faced in the post-separation period.

- Moving through the post-separation transition offered women an opportunity to find themselves again and reflect on what is important to them. Even when challenges are far from over, women can foresee a future away from the abusive relationship.
- Hence, women's decision-making in the post-separation period is complex, non-linear and adaptive to the circumstances and internal needs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To better support women's decision-making and experience in the post-separation period, we recommend the following:

### **INFORMED DECISION-MAKING**

#### ***Recommendation 1: Clear, consolidated, and accessible information about the tasks, processes and decisions facing women in the post-separation period***

To enable women to make informed decisions post-separation from abuse, we recommend consolidating existing information relating to the practical tasks, processes and decisions women may face in the post-separation period into one accessible source to provide factual, objective information and resources to help signpost what women may face in the post-separation period. This information could include (for example) existing online information on family violence support options, PPO, divorce, custody, and housing policies. This resource could be supplemented with information to help with women's material needs at this time such as financial guidance, housing options and employment pathways for women.

### **SUPPORTING WOMEN'S AGENCY**

#### ***Recommendation 2: Women-defined support services that recognise women's agency***

Women's decision-making in the context of abuse is not linear, is adaptive to circumstances and may change according to women's needs and priorities. With greater understanding of the complex decisions and processes facing women in the post-separation period, and women's internal needs and processes, services can be empowered to journey with their clients according to their own timeline. Together with more informed decision-making (recommendation 1), fostering women's agency may help women to overcome their ambivalence to work through the post-separation period with more confidence and a sense of self-efficacy towards empowerment.

### **PEER SUPPORT**

#### ***Recommendation 3: Availability of tailored support groups specifically for women navigating the post-separation period***

The availability of tailored support groups specifically for women navigating the post-separation period may provide a non-judgemental environment to reduce the isolation faced by many women navigating complex decision-making post-separation. Bringing together women with the same experiences can enable the sharing of resources, success stories and strengths, challenges, and barriers, as well as provide important social and emotional connections to build resilience and empower women through this transition.

## **SUPPORTIVE ECOSYSTEM**

### ***Recommendation 4: Educating the family violence system on women's post-separation experience***

There is a need for greater awareness and understanding of women's experience in the post-separation stage and the many complex challenges and considerations that influence their decision-making. Services should receive consistent education on the dynamics of post-separation abuse, the post-separation tasks, processes and decision points, and the challenges and concerns of women. All services should be trauma-informed, empathetic, and non-judgemental of women's decisions. Having a shared understanding and consistent approach by service providers across all touch points can help to support women's agency in their decision-making to reach empowerment beyond the post-separation phase.

### ***Recommendation 5: Prioritising protection needs of women who experience abuse and reducing stigma towards separated women***

Education is needed to help families to understand the experience of family violence and provide non-judgemental support to women who make decisions to disclose their experience of abuse and leave the abusive relationship. Reducing societal and cultural stigma associated with experiencing family violence, being divorced and being a single mother is an important step to achieving a society that is inclusive, equal and a safe environment for future generations of Singaporeans. Greater focus should be on increasing accountability and rehabilitation of perpetrators to strengthen the stability of the family unit.

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# GLOSSARY

AWARE	Association of Women for Action and Research
BTO	Build-to-Order housing
CCPS	Care Corner ProjectStART
DEO	Domestic Exclusion Order
DSSA	Divorce Support Specialist Agency
EO	Expedited Order
FSC	Family Service Centre
FJC	Family Justice Court
IB	International Baccalaureate
IPV	Intimate partner violence
PPO	Personal Protection Order
PSC	Protection Specialist Centre
SSA	Social Service Agencies

## INTRODUCTION

Family violence is a significant issue globally with one in four women experiencing physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime (World Health Organization 2021). In Singapore, a national survey found that 6% of women experienced intimate partner and/or sexual violence in 2013 (Bouhours, Cheong et al. 2013). On average, over 2,700 applications for Personal Protection Orders are filed each year with the overwhelming majority lodged by women (SG Courts; Ministry of Social and Family Development, 2020). Consistent with global trends, family violence reports increased in Singapore during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Social and Family Development 2020, UN Women 2020, Taskforce on Family Violence 2021). Family violence results in major acute and long-term health consequences that place a significant economic and social burden on societies (Oliver, Alexander et al. 2019) and studies have shown that family violence victims are high users across the broad spectrum of healthcare services (Bonomi, Anderson et al. 2009).

For many women, leaving an abusive relationship is a key transition fraught with complexity. Post-separation abuse may continue or escalate ('separation assault') with ongoing coercive control a common feature (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs 2013, Toews and Bermea 2017). In this phase, women may be engaged with the justice system, navigating co-parenting with an abusive ex-spouse, as well managing trauma responses of children who may present challenging relationships (McManus, Belton et al. 2013, Holt 2016). Women's own process of healing and recovery to rebuild their lives involves complex processes and takes time (Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2004, Zeoli, Rivera et al. 2013, Parkin 2017, Czerny, Lassiter et al. 2018).

Hence, establishing lives post-separation is a complex process involving many decisions which require weighing up competing interests. In this context, women may make decisions which may be perceived as not in their best interests or at odds with expectations of those in the support ecosystem (e.g., not pursuing action, returning to the relationship, foregoing entitlements, custody/care and control of children or financial resources). It is apparent that such decision-making involves many considerations and consequences.

While there is significant theoretical literature focusing on women's decision-making processes to leave abusive relationships, less is known about the decisions women make and their decision-making processes in the post-separation stage. This study aims to explore the decisions women make post-separation, what influences these decisions, and what role can formal and informal support play.

## INSIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE

### WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF ABUSE

The research on women's decision-making in the context of experiencing family violence has predominantly focused on understanding women's decision to stay, leave, or return to the violent relationship (Wuest and Merritt-Gray 1999, Thomas, Goodman et al. 2015, Heron, Eisma et al. 2022).

Since the 1970s when the issue of domestic and family violence began to receive greater attention, society has fixated on the question “why doesn't she leave?” with the prevailing view that women's lives will be free from violence once she physically separates from the abusive spouse (Bruton and Tyson 2018).

Existing research shows that both psychological (e.g., safety) and material factors (e.g., employment and income) are important predictors of leaving or staying, but that leaving is a non-linear process, involving several phases and multiple attempts (Anderson and Saunders 2003, Keeling, Smith et al. 2016). Women often show ambivalence in the decision to leave with research showing that the process encompasses 'stages of change'. The Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM) - originally developed for understanding addiction - has been adapted to intimate partner violence to show how women go through many (non-linear) phases in their decision to leave or stay (Reisenhofer and Taft 2013). These include: pre-contemplation (before abuse is recognised as a problem), contemplation (acknowledgement of abuse), the preparation stage (weighing up the pros and cons of change and options), taking action to end the abuse, and maintenance (actions to prevent violence from reoccurring (Burke et al., 2001).

There is now more research revealing the social forces and complex factors involved in leaving a relationship characterised by abuse including the severity of violence, fear for self and others, protecting the children, the loss of hope for signs of change (Anderson and Saunders 2003, Barrios, Khaw et al. 2021, Heron, Eisma et al. 2022). Societal norms and cultural beliefs about the role of women and the family unit are another factor affecting women's decision-making to stay or leave the relationship. A study of Chinese survivors of violence in Hong Kong showed that women had internalised cultural beliefs that women should be good wives, obey their husbands and stay to provide children with a family (Loke, Wan et al. 2012). Women's decision to disclose their experience of abuse and seek help is also a complex process. A UK study revealed that women experience long periods of ambivalence and few disclosed abuse while still in the abusive relationship (Evans and Feder 2016). Disclosure can also invoke negative reactions from informal support networks.

## THE POST-SEPARATION PERIOD

By contrast, less is known about how women navigate the post-separation period and the multitude of decisions that they must make on their journey to a life after abuse (Anderson and Saunders 2003, Kelly, Sharp et al. 2014).

What is known is that the post-separation period is a significantly challenging and fraught period for women. Contrary to perceptions that women's lives are automatically made safer upon physical separation, leaving is the most dangerous time for women. According to a census of femicides in the UK, in 2020, 37% of women killed by a current or former partner were reported to have separated or taken steps to separate, with 29% killed within the first month and 10% killed within the first year of separation (The Femicide Census 2020). Spousal abuse often continues and may take different forms as women engage in the process of disentangling their lives from the abuser. Studies show that women have increased odds of experiencing post-separation abuse where women initiate the separation and where coercive control was a feature of the abusive

relationship (Shim, Wilkes et al. 2022). The Duluth model of power and control has been adapted to show the different tactics used by perpetrators to continue to exert control over their ex-spouses through the post-separation period (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs 2013). These eight tactics include: using physical and sexual violence against mother and children, using harassment and intimidation, undermining her ability to parent, discrediting her as a mother, withholding financial support, endangering children, and disrupting her relationships with children (Toews and Bermea 2017).

In addition to ongoing experience of abuse, in the post-separation phase women may also be engaged with the justice system. Studies have shown that women's experiences of engaging with legal processes of divorce can be extremely traumatic, described as 'secondary victimisation'. Co-parenting in the context of separation is another point of vulnerability as women manage child contact with their ex-spouse through ongoing post-separation violence and abuse (Humphreys and Thiara 2003). In such circumstances, women have reported giving up everything "just to get out of the abusive marriage" (Toews and Bermea 2017).

Women's own health and well-being may be compromised in the post-separation period. Women may be recovering from physical and/or psychological injury and trauma, and mental health disorders such as PTSD, anxiety and depression. A review of the impact of intimate partner violence on the brain found links between the chronic IPV and psychological stress that can lead to poor decision-making amongst other cognitive responses (Wong, Fong et al. 2014).

At this time, women may also be managing the trauma responses of children, and rebuilding the mother-child relationship (McManus, Belton et al. 2013, Holt 2016). Women's own process of healing to rebuild their lives involves complex processes and separated mothers in particular report having limited opportunity to recover from the experience of abuse (Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2004, Zeoli, Rivera et al. 2013, Parkin 2017, Czerny, Lassiter et al. 2018, Francia, Millea et al. 2020)

## UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING

It can be challenging for service providers to understand the apparent contradictions in women's decision-making in the context of abuse (Nikupeteri 2017). Feminist research over the decades has emphasised women's agency in their decision-making as they actively manage living with abuse, when to leave and the aftermath (Anderson and Saunders 2003).

Yet, for service providers whose primary goal is to maximise women and children's safety to live free from abuse, it can be difficult to understand and support women's agency when decisions do not appear to align with this goal or may not be perceived to be in their best interests. For those professions working closely to support women, the decisions of women can appear inconsistent or irrational, for example, not reporting a violation of a restraining order or returning to the abuser after leaving. These decisions may be interpreted as passivity or weakness rather than women strategically exercising agency to manage the abuser's behaviour and to protect themselves and their children. Similar interpretations may be evidenced by others in the family

violence ecosystem such as child protection workers, police officers, lawyers and judges and even domestic violence victim advocates (Dunn and Powell-Williams 2007).

Women's decision-making in the context of abuse involves many competing considerations and is adaptive and can change. A study by Kelly (2009) showed that women do a risk benefit analysis weighing up danger with stigma, shame, and the need for support. This 'calculus of disclosure' results in adaptive decisions where women may change and remake decisions to meet changing circumstances (Kelly 2009). Other studies show that women juggle multiple factors when making decisions which can involve making trade-offs that may not be well-understood by others (Thomas, Goodman et al. 2015). A study of women's decision whether to seek crisis shelter (Stork 2008) highlighted that sequential decision problem models are problematic for high stakes complex decision making involving conflicting goals and time pressures.

Given the complexity of the post-separation period, it is vital that service providers understand how women navigate this period and the multitude of decisions that they must make on their journey to a life after abuse (Kelly, Sharp et al. 2014). There is potential for misunderstanding of women's decisions and misalignment of support to meet their needs.

## AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To address this gap, this research aimed to understand women's decision-making post-separation to develop better responses to empower women to achieve a life free from violence. Drawing on interviews with survivors of family violence who have separated, this qualitative study proposed to answer the following research questions:

- What are the key decisions that women make during post-separation?
- How do women make these decisions?
- What are the motivations, influences and contexts/conditions that give rise to certain decisions?
- How do women perceive the role of formal supports in women's decision-making?

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodology was used to enable an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of women's decision-making post-separation from an abusive spouse. We adopted a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach which is particularly useful for generating theory or conceptual understanding in an under-researched area and for understanding and elucidating complex processes and social phenomena in a methodologically rigorous way (Charmaz 2014).

Ethics approval was granted by the full board of Institutional Review Board of the Singapore Institute of Technology [Approval number 2022077, 19 May 2022].

Using purposive sampling, we recruited current or former clients of Care Corner Project StART, a Protection Specialist Centre in Singapore. We also recruited participants from Care Corner Family Service Centres (FSCs).

Participants were eligible to be included in the study if they were:

- Female, aged over 18 years
- Had experienced spousal violence (of any kind)
- Current or former client of CCPS or Care Corner FSCs
- Did not have immediate safety concerns (for current clients, this was assessed by their case worker; for former clients this was assessed by Co-PI, who is a social worker at screening)
- Had taken concrete steps to end the abusive relationship (e.g., applying for a Personal Protection Order, filing for divorce, living separately etc.)
- Are conversant in basic English

In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants with two members of the study team at Project StART premises. Interviews were transcribed and offered back to all participants to review. Initial analyses of the interview data were presented back to participants at two focus groups. Participants were provided with financial compensation for participating in the interview and focus group.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Eleven women agreed to be interviewed which were held between July to October 2022. All participants were invited to attend a follow up focus group. Two separate focus groups were held involving six participants in February and March 2023 to share initial findings and seek further input and elaboration on the analytic direction.

Table 1 sets out the characteristics of the sample. The participants ranged in age from 24 years to 59 years. Over a third of participants were Chinese and another third were of Indian race. Two participants were foreign-born, one of European nationality and the other a Hong Kong national. All but two of the women had children. The majority of participants were divorced, with three participants separated (non-cohabiting) at the time of interview. The sample of participants were highly educated with the majority holding a university or postgraduate degree. All but two participants were working full-time, with two participants unemployed. The majority (n=9, 81%) of study participants fell below the median monthly Singaporean income (SGD \$5,070 per month in 2022) with 3 participants falling within the low-income bracket (social service office financial assistance eligibility is SGD \$650 per month).

The participants in this study described experiencing a range of types of abuse including verbal abuse privately and in public, emotional abuse such as humiliation, 'scolding' and calling women vulgar names, intimidation and threats to kill, rape and sexual abuse, physical abuse in the form of severe beatings resulting in injuries and hospitalisation. Some women also described the abuse

involving weapons. One woman related that their husband killed the family pets. Coercive and controlling behaviour included constant phone calling/messaging and monitoring of the wife's movements, jealous accusations of infidelity and isolation of the wife from family and friends. Control of money was common, and some women related their husband's deceptive behaviour by getting women to take on debt and sign legal and financial documents without their full knowledge or understanding. For some women, the forms of abuse were ongoing into the post-separation period.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (n = 11)

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>N (%)</b>	<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
<i>Age</i>		<i>Monthly income (SGD)</i>	
20 – 24 years	1 (9)	< \$1,000	3 (27)
25 – 29 years	1 (9)	\$2,000 - \$2,999	3 (27)
30 – 34 years	1 (9)	\$3,000 - \$3,999	2 (18)
35 – 39 years	2 (18)	\$4,000 - \$4,999	1 (9)
40 – 44 years	2 (18)	\$6,000 - \$6,999	1 (9)
45 – 49 years	1 (9)	> \$10,000	1 (9)
50 – 54 years	2 (18)		
55 – 59 years	1 (9)		
<i>Race</i>		<i>Home ownership</i>	
Chinese	4 (36)	Occupier	4 (36)
Malay	1 (9)	Co-owned	3 (27)
Indian	4 (36)	Sole-owned	2 (18)
Other	2 (18)	Open market rental <sup>1</sup>	2 (18)
<i>Education</i>		<i>Marital Status</i>	
Secondary	2 (18)	Separated (not cohabiting)	2 (18)
ITE <sup>2</sup>	1 (9)	Divorced	9 (82)
Diploma/Professional qual	2 (18)	<i>Employment Status</i>	

<sup>1</sup> Refers to the main home rental market in Singapore. This is in contrast to the Public Rental Scheme, where homes can be rented at significantly lower rates due to heavy government subsidies.

<sup>2</sup> Institute of Technical Education

University/Postgraduate	6 (55)	Working Full-time	9 (82)
		Not employed	2 (18)

Table 2 sets out the details of the participants with profiles set out in Appendix A.

*Table 2 Details of participants*

<b>No.</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>No. of children</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>PPO<sup>3</sup></b>
P1	Praneeta	24	Indian	3	Separated (non-cohabiting)	Unemployed	Yes
P2	Xi Hui	39	Chinese	1	Divorced	Unemployed	Yes
P3	Amirah	34	Malay	0	Divorced	Working (full-time)	Yes
P4	Sylvie	53	Other	2	Divorced	Working (full-time)	Yes
P5	Xin Ling	40	Other	3	Divorced	Working (full-time)	Yes
P6	Pranshi	53	Indian	0	Divorced	Working (full-time)	No
P7	Devi	26	Indian	1	Separated (non-cohabiting)	Working (full-time)	Yes
P8	Xin En	43	Chinese	2	Divorced	Working (full-time)	Yes
P9	Saanvi	45	Indian	2	Divorced	Working (full-time)	Yes
P10	Jia Qi	56	Chinese	2	Divorced	Working (full-time)	No
P11	Si Ling	39	Chinese	2	Separated (non-cohabiting)	Working (full-time)	Yes

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<sup>3</sup> Personal Protection Order



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Overall, the post-separation period is a significantly challenging one for women. After leaving the abusive relationship, women face many barriers and challenges as they navigate the many decisions and processes in their journey to safety and freedom from the abusive relationship.

We present the themes from our analysis of the interviews and focus groups in three sections:

- (a) Decision points along the post-separation journey
- (b) Women's internal processes
- (c) Women's support needs

### DECISION-MAKING AND CHALLENGES ALONG THE POST-SEPARATION JOURNEY

From the participants' interviews and focus group discussions, we mapped the key decision points and processes to explore the influences on women's decision-making and the challenges they faced.



Figure 1: Post-separation decisions and processes

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## Personal Protection Orders (PPOs)

In Singapore, individuals who are victims of family violence can file for a Personal Protection Order (PPO) against their family members. The PPO can be filed either at the Family Justice Court (FJC) or at one of the Protection Specialist Centres (PSCs).

Individuals may obtain a PPO and continue to cohabit in the relationship while others may apply for a PPO in the post-separation phase after having left the abusive relationship. In Singapore, unless the violence perpetrated by a perpetrator is assessed to have caused 'grievous hurt', which is an arrestable act, victims would require a PPO to compel the police to respond to reports of family violence. Victims are often advised by the police and social workers to apply for the PPO after an incident of violence has occurred, to protect the victim from further incidents of violence.

A PPO may take some time to be granted as the application must be heard in court in the presence of both the victim and the alleged perpetrator. To ensure victims receive timely protection, the judge may decide to grant an Expedited Order (EO) based on the balance of probabilities once the PPO application has been made.

On top of the PPO, victims can also choose to apply for a Domestic Exclusion Order (DEO), which, if granted, restricts the perpetrator from entering all or part of the victim's place of residence. If the PPO/DEO has been granted to the victim, the victim can file for a breach of PPO/DEO by calling the police should there be a subsequent incident of family violence after the PPO/DEO has been granted. A breach of PPO is a criminal offence, and depending on the severity of the breach, the police may decide to charge the perpetrator in court for the breach of PPO. A breach of a PPO, EO or DEO is punishable by a fine of up to \$2,000 or by imprisonment of up to 6 months, or both.

The key decisions for women relating to PPO in the post-separation phase were:

- Do they apply for PPO for themselves and/or children, and when to do so?
- Is it safe to apply for PPO?
- Do they continue with the PPO process if their application was contested?

All but two participants had a PPO in place to protect them from their ex-spouse's violence.

While a PPO is the key legal option for women to seek protection against family violence, it appeared that most women had **limited awareness or understanding of PPOs** until advised by the Police when called to attend a violent incident or social workers if they had made contact with an FSC.

*"... the counsellor was telling me I should go for PPO then I'm like I heard of PPO before because I was informed by the police officer a few years ago ... but I*

*didn't do research about it. I said I won't. Then she told me about PPO and I told her honestly I don't know what PPO is. So, she said, "Why don't you go online and search how to apply for PPO, there are a lot of organisations that can help you." (Amirah, P3)*

Participants spoke of being advised by the police to take out a PPO against their ex-spouse after repeated reports of family violence incidents to the police so that the police could take action against their ex-spouse for breach of PPO.

*"... the police already scolded me, you making a police report is no use. You must take a PPO to protect yourself and you can protect your child also." (Xi Hui, P2)*

While the motivation for seeking a PPO was to enhance their safety, several women had **real fears about their ex-spouse's reaction to the news of the PPO** that would almost certainly result in escalated violence. Jia Qi (P10) described the protective measures advised by a friend who had been through the PPO process.

*"And she said to me you better be prepared, because sometimes when you file for PPO, it doesn't make matters better, sometimes it becomes worse because he gets very angry that I report. So she said when you want to do it you have to be very sure you have people around you, if you are in trouble, somebody can help you, don't just file and anything and that guy can be very violent and angry you know." (Jia Qi, P10)*

Factoring the fear of further violence into their decision-making, several participants shared that they only applied for a PPO *after* having physically removed themselves from the relationship.

*"So it wouldn't be safe for me to be in the same house as him, so I would definitely need to leave before I get the PPO sent to him." (Si Ling, P11)*

Even when the decision had been made, the process of applying for a PPO needed to be exercised with caution, particularly where monitoring and surveillance were a feature of the abuse. Si Ling (P11) spoke of the **challenge in getting the necessary medical and police documentation to apply for a PPO, without being detected by her husband who would monitor her movements**. She described the tense story of being shunted back and forth between GPs, polyclinic doctors and the police and her moment of fear when her abusive ex-spouse called while she was at the police station.

*"... halfway I think I there was a moment at the police station I was at the police station for too long and my son was dismissed from his class already and the teacher called me like where are you, I'm like shit, had to run over ... and then my husband actually called like eh why are you not there to pick him up?" (Si Ling, P11)*

Children were another factor women considered when applying for a PPO. A common fear expressed by several participants was the **risk of losing their children when deciding to leave the**

**relationship** and take official steps to seek protection from abuse. Xi Hui (P2) highlighted uncertainties about getting a PPO centering around the fear that her ex-spouse would snatch the child from school. Xi Hui described the role of social workers in helping to demystify the process.

*"I am afraid that if I get PPO, my ex-husband will snatch my child. This is the worry that I have if I get PPO so I don't know what to do. So in this thing, S (social worker) ... we discuss like okay, ... first we take a PPO like maintenance like slowly, slowly, slowly ... maybe we should do this first, settle one thing then we follow like another thing, finish another thing then..." (Xi Hui, P2)*

The PPO process requires that the abusive ex-spouse must agree to the women's application before the court. Some participants highlighted pressures to withdraw the PPO as their **ex-spouse denied the violence incidents** and they had to persevere through the process to be granted the PPO.

*"He said he never and don't want to give me (the PPO), he said he never beat me... this is what I want, my PPO to protect me and my children. I insist. Okay so the lady talked to him again and he had no choice because we got proof... Because I insist I want it, this is my right to have it also." (Xi Hui, P2)*

Pranshi (P6) shared that her **ex-spouse counter-filed a PPO against her**, which delayed her ongoing PPO application against him, and offered to drop the PPO against her only if she agreed to drop the PPO against him.

*"Then he said, unless I cancel my PPO order against him, he [won't] cancel his... so everything is cancelled." (Pranshi, P6)*

Some women were also faced with the decision whether to withdraw a PPO. Xin Ling (P5) expressed that she felt **burdened to withdraw her PPO application because of the financial stressors**, especially when her ex-spouse had decided to stop providing financially once he was informed about her PPO application against him.

*"Did he really fight? He did not really fight, he just stopped providing. He doesn't really need to fight, he just did not transfer money then it's done... I heard some cases that the husband would cut all sources of the money, that the woman cannot survive and go back to the abuse or toxic relationship again and again, even though they have the PPO then they will just revoke the PPO, just to get back home to survive." (Xin Ling, P5)*

Despite the challenges of obtaining a PPO, Jia Qi (P10) recounted the helplessness that she felt when her **ex-spouse appealed to the high court to rescind the PPO** that had been granted to her, on the basis that there was no violence committed against her and framed her as having "overreacted".

*"And then, at the end, he used that in court to say that, "See? She's overreacting. There was no violence at all. Even the police didn't do anything." So, it backfired the other way and my PPO was revoked. And because it was revoked, guess what? I don't even have*

*support anymore because it's revoked. And because it went to the supreme court." (Jia Qi, P10)*

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## **Divorce**

Under the Women's Charter Act (1961) section 95, applicants must have been married for at least 3 years before a writ of divorce can be filed and applicants will have to prove that the marriage has *irretrievably broken down* due to one of these facts: adultery, unreasonable behaviour, desertion, or separation. If the applicant had not fulfilled at least 3 years of marriage, under the Women's Charter Act (1961) Section 94, they may seek permission from the court to do so if they can prove that they had suffered *exceptional hardship*. It is worth noting that family violence may or may not be considered 'exceptional hardship', and it is up to the applicant and his/her lawyer's assessment to determine if it is worth trying to prove that in court.

If the divorce or ancillary matters are contested, the Family Justice Court often suggests counselling, mediation, or joint conferences for parties to resolve their differences. These counselling and mediation sessions may go on for up to a few months depending on the circumstances of the case.

The key decisions for women relating to divorce in the post-separation phase were:

- Do they initiate the divorce application and when should they do so?
- Do they have sufficient financial means to do so?
- Should they pursue custody, care and control and ancillary matters in the face of limited financial and emotional resources and the risk of protracted legal proceedings?
- How to keep themselves physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe during the divorce proceedings?

### Decision to divorce

The decision to proceed with seeking a divorce was not taken lightly by women. Some participants shared that it took years to make the decision to divorce. For most women in this study, the decision to end the relationship and proceed with divorce was made when the **abuse had reached a point where it was intolerable, and women could see no hope for change.**

*"The boundaries get stretched further and further. And it was a lot of emotional abuse I would say, a lot of yelling and screaming and frightening? And definitely also combined with physical. And of course afterwards he will always be very sorry and "I will never do it again"... So I guess, only when I was first diagnosed with breast cancer, this was a relapse. I really, you know, started to analyse whether it is his behaviour..." (Sylvie, P4)*

*"I ended the relationship because of the domestic abuse and also there were emotional abuse, financial abuse and sexual abuse between husband and I. Yah it's really terrible and so the reason I end the, is because the stress is so tense that I cannot stand anymore."  
(Xin Ling, P5)*

For Xin En (P8), her decision to file for divorce from her abusive spouse was finally motivated by the betrayal of trust from discovering his multiple extra-marital affairs throughout the 20 years of marriage.

*"I had reached my threshold... I cannot take it... I think what triggered me was the woman. I asked him "why did you post this kind of thing?... He said "just to make you angry"... Just to make me angry? What does he get by making me angry? It caused me to be unable to trust him... How can I trust him and go back to him?... I am not sure if he had sexual intimacy with other women..." (Xin En, P8)*

Some women indicated that the importance of proceeding with **divorce was to gain more control and certainty over their own lives**. In the wake of threats from her ex-spouse to leave the country, Xin Ling (P5) foresaw the challenges of enforcing maintenance. Hence for her, being able to ensure her own financial and job security was important.

But for several other women, **a big factor in the decision related to certainty around children and fear of losing them**. It appeared from women's accounts that they needed to approach the decision to divorce quite strategically. Custody of children and children's welfare is a key issue at the forefront of women's minds when going through these processes.

*"So I just prefer to have divorce done, at least I have the custody. I can ... take care of my children legally without being sued for kidnapping." (Xin Ling, P5)*

However, women also spoke of **facing pressure from several sides not to proceed with divorce** – pressure from family, friends, their ex-spouse, and societal, religious and cultural pressures. Women were often told to reconsider divorce for the sake of the children and to present the face of the perfect family.

*"And then his parents and he forced me to rethink the stuff. So they were like, you can't leave, you know, what will society say? It's considered a taboo to get a divorce in an Indian family. No one will remarry, you know, everyone will look down on you and stuff." (Devi, P7)*

*"... his mother ... said you are Christian; you have to love your enemy. You have to stay in this family ..." (Xin Ling, P5)*

*"... actually (when) I'm pregnant I want to divorce already ... It's the old thinking you see ... You must give your child a home, a family, don't do that, don't do that... actually I (was) very firm I want to divorce, very very early, but old people thinking. They said 'children need a family ...' (Xi Hui, P2)*

### Divorce processes

In Singapore, parties can apply for divorce on the 'simplified track' if parties can agree on all issues relating to divorce and ancillary matters, or the 'normal track' if they cannot agree that the marriage has irretrievably broken down and there is division over ancillary matters such as care of children, maintenance, and the division of matrimonial assets.

Several women spoke of navigating the legal processes alone. For some the process was relatively quick and smooth. However, others described the divorce proceedings - especially where there were contested matters - as a long drawn-out and costly process. These divorce proceedings took a toll both financially and emotionally on women as highlighted by Pranshi (P6).

*Actually the legal process is quite ... so ... long.... I think I lost a lot of things. So when he was treating me like that, I felt that I was losing a lot of money, a lot of everything. And then the court process was extended a lot. Everytime will be changing date. This date or next month, next month. It was dragging, dragging, dragging. (Pranshi, P6)*

### Legal support

The critical role of good legal support through the journey of applying for divorce was a recurring theme. There were mixed experiences. One participant had independent means to be able to afford a good lawyer.

*"Thanks to Ms [lawyer], because she is very clinical, no emotions, that is just a process you need to go through, stop crying, is what she kept on telling me..." (Sylvie, P4)*

However, this was not always available, some women were subjected to the quality of legal advice and their financial resources. There was consensus in one focus group that legal support was kind of luck of the draw. Some were able to afford their own lawyers, others relied on legal aid. Some shared in the focus group that they felt the legal aid lawyers were not acting in their best interests. Pranshi (P6) reported that even though she had a court order to take over the matrimonial flat, her ex-spouse had sought a variation order to contest it. While she had engaged a lawyer, she questioned whether she had taken the wrong lawyer as she felt at times frustrated that her lawyer appeared more concerned about the opposition party rather than representing her needs.

Some participants felt that the complexity of their cases affected the willingness of legal aid to invest the required time in their case. Given their limited resources, women felt powerless to gain appropriate advocacy in complex legal proceedings, particularly if their ex-spouse had the means to marshal expert legal support.

Having some legal knowledge was an advantage in dealing with complex legal processes.

*"because of my background... It's actually quite easy for me and I have a lot of connections. Then, the founder of the Mediation Centre...he taught me the skill to negotiate which is very good. I managed to get my things (laughs). Yeah and then uh I, my, my own boss, they are senior counsels so they gave me advice, ... how to talk and how to prepare the documents." (Xin Ling, P5)*

#### Safety concerns due to ongoing tension

While navigating the divorce process, women had to be mindful of their own safety especially in their day-to-day interactions with the abusive spouse. Amirah (P3) expressed that **she felt scared when she had to pass the divorce letter to her ex-spouse**, which she ensured she did in the presence of his parents.

*"That day I decided to just file (for divorce), I told myself, "It's okay, there is going to be counselling, so we should be able to counsel and talk to each other about this". So, when I got the (divorce) letter already, I honestly was scared to give it to him... because I don't know how he would react. Cuz to him, I didn't talk to him about it but I then suddenly gave him this (letter)." (Amirah, P3)*

Another participant related that after she filed for divorce, **her ex-spouse sent her long messages to regain her affection and when it did not work, he resorted to threatening and intimidating messages** and images to change her mind about the divorce. Participants reflected on the power and control that their ex-spouse continued to hold over them and their children in the post-separation period. Xin Ling (P5) recounted that when she left the marital home with the children, her ex-spouse immediately threatened **to revoke their Permanent Resident (PR) status** which would effectively exile them from the country, unless she returned to the marriage.

Si Ling (P11) revealed how even while she was mindful to be as amicable and as conciliatory as possible to minimise the risk of tension escalation and to prevent putting the children in a spot, **it was difficult to predict her ex-spouse's responses**.

*"No, he still hold the power. There's not much room for negotiation. It's like if he's happy he will say that yeah tomorrow you can bring them (the children) out. If he's not happy then there's no way you can negotiate your way out of it...And the kids are... I don't know, they don't say they are afraid but I know they are afraid. They just you know, he orders them to the room, they will go back to the room or they will just freeze." (Si Ling, P11)*

#### Intentional delay of court proceedings and manipulation of court systems

Saanvi (P9) recounted that her ex-spouse had **defaulted on child maintenance court order and left the country** at the advice of his mother, who told him that the court order cannot be enforced when he is out of the jurisdiction. Her ex-spouse also **filed for 3 appeal orders for the maintenance which delayed the finalisation of the divorce**.

*"Because he is doing this so, even the court is feeling helpless. Like the last day the judge told my lawyer, "oh he has appealed so I cannot do anything now till the appeal is heard".*



*So they're feeling helpless, you know. They know that he should be penalised for this but they cannot take a decision unless the appeal cases are heard or the stay order is heard."* (Saanvi, P9)

Saanvi (P9) and Xin Ling (P5) also shared frustrations that their ex-spouse had tried to cut off financial support for the family by **threatening to file for bankruptcy** and leaving the country respectively.

*"That's what he wrote in the email. He's saying he will be applying for bankruptcy so that he doesn't have to do anything so that the court cannot even tell him to pay."* (Saanvi, P9)

Pranshi (P6) spoke about a **delay in receiving the divorce papers filed by ex-spouse**, which she suspected was done intentionally to reduce the time that she had to file for a counterclaim to the divorce agreement.

Jia Qi (P10) spoke that her ex-spouse was financially better off than her and utilised the court system against her. She recounted the long-drawn court proceedings whereby her **ex-spouse spent hours arguing with the judge** and they were unable to come to a consensus.

*"And he drives the court insane also. He changed my occupation, he changed my age. So court time is half an hour, so half an hour argue how old I am. I'm born in 1966. Just count... what you arguing about. So they argue about such things. And because of that, no time, right? So the court session is adjourned each time...He may be making thousands, (but) I'm not working because of my children, I can't work, so can you imagine I forked out more than 250 thousand in legal fees."* (Jia Qi, P10)

In general, participants showed disillusionment with the system particularly around the enforcement of maintenance orders. In their experience, the existence of the order did not mean that their ex-spouse would pay. The onus was on the women to establish a pattern of their ex-spouse's non-compliant behaviour to the courts. This is why some women gave up on pursuing maintenance as the process itself would involve more costs for women.

*"I gave up the maintenance from my ex to speed up the divorce process because he played a lot of games... not showing up, not submitting the papers, late at the court... he says he goes back to his home country... he thought he could stop the divorce."* (Xin Ling, P5)

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### **Custody and parenting**

In Singapore, child custody refers to the custodial parent(s)' authority in making major decisions regarding their child such as education, religion, and healthcare. Custody can be awarded on a sole, joint, hybrid (one parent granted custody but must consult the other parent), or split custody (where there are more than one sibling). On the other hand, *care and control* is only given to one parent, who will be involved in the child's day-to-day matters. The parent who has not been granted care and control will be given child access rights. Child access arrangements can be

either negotiated informally between parents or through the courts if parents were unable to reach a consensus. In Singapore, joint custody orders are usually granted as opposed to sole custody orders, as the courts view the presence of both parents in the life of their child as pivotal to child development.

The key decisions for women relating to custody and parenting in the post-separation phase were:

- Do they have the financial means to provide materially for their children?
- Should they pursue custody, care and control and ancillary matters in the face of limited financial and emotional resources and the risk of protracted legal proceedings?

Decisions around custody, care and control issues can be a fraught process where the parties are unable to agree. For some participants, **custody of children became a battleground for the relationship.**

*"I don't want the joint custody because ... our thinking is different ... so in between maintenance for our child, because he refuse to give it to me ... he will argue how come so much. So everything he keep on argue." (Xi Hui, P2).*

Several women observed that during the relationship their ex-spouse had limited involvement with the children, however **after separation, the children became the centre of negotiations during the divorce process.** This presented tensions for women when the wants of their ex-spouses were at odds with the wishes of the children. Saanvi (P9)'s ex-spouse was adamant about seeking custody of the children, however, the children were resistant on account of the violence they witnessed perpetrated by their father upon their mother. Custody appeared to be another avenue for post-separation abuse tactics to undermine women. Xi Hui (P2) believed that her ex-spouse was influenced by his mother to intentionally fought for custody to "make things difficult for her".

#### Deciding whether to fight for custody

For some women, a particularly painful decision was whether to fight for custody of their children through the courts. Financial capacity appeared to be a key consideration in this decision-making process. Xin En (P8) faced the stark reality of incurring higher legal costs to pursue custody of her children, which she was unable to afford at the point. When weighing this decision, she considered the material needs of her children into the future. As her ex-spouse had a higher earning capacity, she believed he would be a better financial provider for the children. However, on hindsight, she reflected that this decision came at a cost as she has had to endure the hurt and pain of being misunderstood by her children; she believed that her decision was weaponized by her ex-spouse who told her children that they had been abandoned by their mother. As a result, her children had not responded to her attempts at communication for the past year.

*“So I will just tell them, uh, every month I will message (my children) and ask them how are you? I don't want to have regrets. Just in case... I believe they will come back. Must give them a bit time because they don't understand. They thought that I had abandoned them. Because their father had told them that... Which I also angry with what he say. He shouldn't cause a divide between my children and I. But it doesn't matter because I know God will help me...” (Xin En, P8)*

**The potential for a negative outcome in the custody process was another factor in the decision-making process.** Si Ling (P11) expressed trepidation about even starting the divorce process as she feared that going through court to finalise divorce proceedings would result in care and control being awarded to her husband (with whom the children currently resided) and that she would ultimately lose access to her children. A sense of disempowerment came through strongly in her interview as she described the level of control exercised by her abusive ex-spouse over several years post-separation where access to her children was subject to the whims of her abusive ex-spouse. She reflected on the notion of abuse and control in the post-separation period and appeared resigned to whatever outcome the court decided, acknowledging that certain was better than the limbo in which she had been existing. This revealed the complex nature of some of the decision-making and considerations through the post-separation period.

*“Best scenario, of course, if I can get the care and control will be the best because after all, you know from what I learnt from the counselling sessions it's all about power (and) control. So if you still have the control of the children, indirectly he is controlling me as well. So I can't escape from them.” (Si Ling, P11)*

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## **Finances**

Financial capacity and stability was another key aspect of the post-separation process that often weighs heavily on women's minds and features in women's decision-making on whether to leave the abusive relationship, as well as to pursue certain actions and entitlements post-separation.

The key decisions for women relating to finances in the post-separation phase were:

- Do they have sufficient financial resources to continue with protracted legal proceedings?
- How to finance the debts/loans incurred by the ex-spouse that they are legally liable for?
- Should they pursue child maintenance to enforce their ex-spouse to provide for the children?

From the women's stories, their financial capacity immediately upon leaving and in the post-separation period appeared linked to the dynamics of the abusive relationship in which economic abuse and financial control were a key feature. In the first place, being able to afford to leave was an important factor considered by women. This had a significant impact as **some women physically left the relationship with very little financial resources** and faced challenges attempting to live their lives independently after separating.

*"... it was a really big decision that I had to go out because there was financial abuse which means actually, I have no more saving and I cannot access my money from home country, my telephone number of my home country was cut and the address was changed then I cannot verify myself and I cannot walk into the bank in my home country to verify and unfreeze the account. So it was really terrible that I had only 300-dollar cash" (Xin Ling, P5)*

Despite several participants being the main breadwinner in the relationship, this did not automatically translate to having secure financial means post-separation. For instance, Amirah (P3) detailed stories of having her financial resources depleted as **she had to finance loans that her ex-spouse had taken up under her name.**

*"I'm also in a lot of debt because of him, a lot of money gone for his business but nothing is coming to fruition and because of him, I'm also under the debt payment scheme to the government. So, there's a lot that is on me so, but for him is scot-free. Because he is not really doing full time, he is doing his own business. So, I have to take on the lone burdens and when I get upset, he said that "you are not supposed to get upset, you are supposed to be an understanding wife you know, it's some of your duties" (Amirah, P3)*

In another example, Xin En (P8) spoke of her husband's deception that left her significantly economically disadvantaged post-separation.

*"I don't have any savings. My husband told me that we cannot have savings because we have to pay debts ... But I didn't know that he had savings behind my back... I was very hurt ..." (Xin En, P8)*

It was apparent that separation from an abusive relationship economically disempowered women. Participants described being forced to carry a large part of the financial burden connected with children when their **ex-spouses withheld finances, hid their financial assets, or did not contribute to maintenance and costs associated with the children such as school fees.** One participant related that her ex-spouse left the country to avoid financial accountability post-separation while another's ex-spouse stopped paying the mortgage on a shared property. The imbalance in and lack of financial resources had a flow-on impact on women's ability to access good quality legal resources and housing, which had potential to affect the stability of the home environment for the children.

Some women spoke with despair of the challenging process in trying to get their spouse to meet his financial obligations and several spoke of compromising in the face of ongoing tension.

*"...because he refuses to give the maintenance for the child right, he will argue how come so much. So everything he keeps on arguing... So this one is like, children one month has already spent thousand something, learn this learn that okay, and before that he never give me any money also..." (Xi Hui, P2).*

**In the post-separation period, women soon learnt that pursuing the legal processes through the courts was a costly exercise with many unforeseen costs.** From obtaining a PPO through to divorce, custody and ancillary matters, some women spoke of often reconsidering their decision to leave the relationship.

*"A lot of things require a lot of fees and so I got the bill for my first PPO hearing, and I was like, is it really worth all these? Is it worth leaving? 'Cause there's so many steps involved. Then it's so many leaves I had to take for work and at one point I almost took a step back and almost went to square one because I was feeling like, if I had not left, I won't be going through all this." (Devi, P7)*

Hence, financial disparity between the parties can play a significant role in the women's decision-making to pursue or not seek entitlements or certain actions that they might wish. As highlighted earlier in the case of Xin En (P8) her decision not to contest for the care and control of her children in the belief that her ex-spouse is in a better financial position to provide for the children's daily needs.

*"Initially I wanted to negotiate to have one child for each of us... then I thought it would be better for the children to be with him given that he is earning more than me... it was a difficult decision to make... I decided to not contest to save cost..." (Xin En, P8).*

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## **Employment**

The key decisions for women relating to employment in the post-separation phase were:

- Do they disclose the abuse and/or divorce proceedings to their employer? If so, what may be the repercussions and/or support?
- How can they re-enter the workforce if they have not been employed for a long time?
- How to balance career prospects with caregiving responsibilities, especially as a single-parent?

The post-separation period had an impact on women's employment in different ways.

There was the **burden of maintaining several jobs to manage the financial demands of the post-separation period**. Some participants shared the **challenges of having to balance childcare for young children with working – or not working**, as some women had to make the decision to opt

out of the paid workforce to take on the full care of their children. One participant spoke of having to turn down a job offer as a result of her circumstances.

*"Well, for me, it is because my son fell into depression and therefore, I wanted to spend more time with him. So, a full-time job where I can't take off days is quite difficult." (Jia Qi, P10)*

*"I have, even have the head-hunter coming after me, asking me to work for [name of company, as regional legal director]. It's amazing, it's amazing but I turned it down because they don't allow me to work from home. It's really quite a pity and actually I cried for one day, that I have to turn down this very good offer... I have to choose my children so I cry secretly, my children don't know. You know, actually my eldest girl she knows, she said oh don't be stuck mama, mama is upset because she cannot work" (Xin Ling, P5)*

**Staying in the relationship long term had also affected women's career and prospects post-separation.** Saanvi (P9) and Jia Qi (P10) spoke of impact on career plateauing. Jia Qi (P10) expressed frustration that she had supported her ex-spouse through his master's degree, yet it was impossible for her to get a job because she had not been employed for a long time.

At the same time, work also appeared as a protective factor for many women. For instance, **work provided them with financial resources, an outlet of distraction from the relationship stressors, and for women with supportive work environments, it helped to reduce social isolation.**

*"... I told my company, they were shocked, they didn't know such a thing was happening. And then my boss finally understands that's why I didn't want to work from home for so long." (Amirah, P3)*

*"When my children are on school holiday, I can bring them into the office and work. They just sit at my side and the staff are quite nice, the colleagues are quite nice. They give them cookies or some Milo then they are happy there. Yeah and they are quite understanding that I, I have to take care of my children and sometimes I have to rush back to school and pick up my girls and they even offer me a transport account so that if there is any emergency that I had to stay in the office for too long, I can take the taxi and claim from the company. This is really good for us." (Xin Ling, P5)*

*"work has kind of become like a safety net you know, it gives me purposefulness, like a distraction..." (Saanvi, P9)*

However, some women expressed that **balancing the demands of work, protracted court processes and single parenting was stressful and had an impact on their work.**

... But the thing is you know I have to think about (how) I'm her mother and father at this point. You know if you think of stuff, she gets sick, I have to bring her, I have to leave my work. You know no company would be like 'oh, I'll give you special treatment because you're a single mom'. Companies really just think about the

work. So it affects my work and like taking so much leave to go for court and stuff, people will be bound to question you like, 'it's still not over?' Like, even today my boss was like, 'Still not over?' Then I said, 'No, I still have to go'." (Devi, P7)

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## Housing

The key decisions for women relating to housing in the post-separation phase were :

- Do they bring their children with them when they decide to leave the marital home? If they do, are they able to meet their children's needs independently? If they don't, will the children be safe in their absence?
- Where can they go after leaving the marital home?
- What are the longer-term accommodation options available to them? Will they qualify for existing housing schemes?
- How to settle the marital home asset during divorce proceedings, especially amid an acrimonious relationship?

### Decision to leave the marital home

For most of the participants in this study, leaving the abusive relationship meant leaving the matrimonial home, irrespective of whether they were the primary breadwinner or the owner of the property. **For some, the decision involved choosing between their personal safety and longer-term stability for the children, and it could be sudden and unplanned. For others, the decision to leave and where to go needed to be approached with caution for safety reasons.** Jia Qi (P10) recounted the fear of being caught on the day she had decided to leave the marital home with her children.

*"So I rented a place, I got some money out and I made sure I got enough to pay for the whole year... And then I left the house with stuff... usually we put the rubbish in the black bag. So I put my clothes in the black bag and then I borrowed his car so he was not going to come back right? So we carry this black bag, put it in the car and you know, piece by piece we move. So he thinks it is garbage, you know got CCTV right...and then we move like that. And on the day we moved, I planned for help to help me...and then I told the children roughly this day. So on that day when he left at 8 o'clock, I told them we were packing and leaving by noon. But they were slow, so we left at 2 and I don't know what on earth that day, he came back early. He usually comes back at 7 but he came back at 4. We just missed each other..." (Jia Qi, P10)*

### Decision of where to go after leaving the marital home

It goes without saying that identifying suitable and available accommodation options is critical for women's decision-making to end an abusive relationship. The decision of where to go involved many considerations. A common assumption is that family is a first option however Xin En (P8) observed that **the family home is not always a viable option.** She was unable to reside with her

parents as she was in a conflictual relationship with her father, therefore she decided to go to a women's crisis shelter.

*"I think a lot of people will have this problem because when you leave this marriage already, you have to think about shelter. Where are you heading? Parents' house or getting your own house? ...I have no options but (the shelter) was a good choice because it's safe, it's well protected, no one knows where it is...." (Xin En, P8)*

Other participants spent time in women's crisis shelters. Xin Ling (P5) and her 3 children left the marital home with only \$300 and stayed at 3 crisis shelters for about a year. She recounted that **while the women's crisis shelter offered her and her children an important pause to be able to consider longer-term options and a supportive environment for them to rebuild their social networks and work through the emotional impact of domestic violence, the stigma of staying in a shelter remains.**

*"I met some women who are also going through the same situation... I suggested they go to crisis shelter but their impression (of crisis shelter) was not so good. They said they won't go to a crisis shelter. I think the image of the crisis shelter has to change." (Xin Ling, P5)*

Unfortunately, women's crisis shelters were not a viable option for all. Jia Qi (P10) noted that she would have felt safer in a women's crisis shelter compared to a rental place. However, as she had teenage boys, they did not meet the eligibility criteria to stay in a women's crisis shelter.

**Finding longer term housing also proved to be a tedious process for some women.** Xin En (P8) explained that under existing housing policies<sup>4</sup> in Singapore, an applicant will not be eligible to purchase Build-to-Order (BTO) flats which are more affordable than resale flats if the applicant had previously purchased BTO flats, which she did during her marriage. Hence, her only option of securing longer term housing for herself was through the rental market, which she was unable to afford with a single income. Xin Ling (P5) echoed similar struggles as existing housing policies in Singapore were not eligible for her given that she does not have a Singapore citizenship.

#### Challenges in settling marital home asset

For some participants, the marital home became the final battleground in divorce proceedings. **Leaving the marital home presented challenges for settling financial arrangements such as selling the home asset and women risked being financially disadvantaged through the process.** Xi Hui (P2) was unable to reach a consensus with her ex-spouse on the sale pricing of the marital home and felt financially disadvantaged as the price he offered was not sufficient for her and her child to purchase another house on their own.

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<sup>4</sup> The Single Singapore Citizen Scheme is only applicable for first-timers applicant who have not taken a housing subsidy through the purchase of other subsidised housing:  
<https://www.hdb.gov.sg/cs/infoweb/residential/buying-a-flat/flat-and-grant-eligibility/singles?anchor=ssc>



Women were faced with the decision on whether to accede to their ex-spouse's demands or to pursue their entitlements which was costly and exhausting in the face of acrimonious interactions often involving lawyers. For instance, Pranshi (P6) was prompted to apply for a Domestic Exclusion Order (DEO) against her ex-spouse who tried to sell the marital home under her name after she had escaped because of his abuse.

*"Actually he's fighting for the flat also... I got a lot of proof which I showed to the court. And he kept on denying... he is not accepting anything... He said the flat is under his parents and he's the one who paid for it in cash but where is the proof? This flat is under my name... and with my parents' support, they gave me cash to do the renovation... So I will fight until now..." (Pranshi, P6)*

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### Summary

This section illuminated the range of external processes and decision points along the post-separation journey that women face when ending a relationship characterised by abuse. The key decisions centred around protection from further abuse and whether to obtain a PPO, proceeding with divorce and custody and parenting, finances, employment, and housing. The women's stories highlighted that these processes are often complex, the steps in the journey are not linear and some processes, such as divorce and resolution of ancillary matters can take many years. The environment in which women make decisions is characterised by instability as women's housing, employment and financial situation are often tenuous with some women leaving with very limited means. For many women, attempts to engage and negotiate with their ex-spouses who are abusive to achieve a resolution through these processes can be fraught and post-separation abuse may be ongoing. The next section focuses on the important internal processes for women going through this significant and challenging phase.

### WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO WOMEN IN THE POST-SEPARATION PHASE

The post-separation period is a uniquely difficult time for women who have experienced abuse due to the need to navigate specific challenges that involve deep and complex emotions. For many of the participants, the post-separation period was a crucial time for them to rethink their values, reconcile with past experiences and re-prioritise their needs. From the women's interviews, we identified a range of key internal considerations that appeared important to women as they navigated the post-separation phase. These included: feeling safe, finding closure, mothering, rethinking relationships, becoming myself again and seeing the future. The next section discusses each of these considerations in detail.

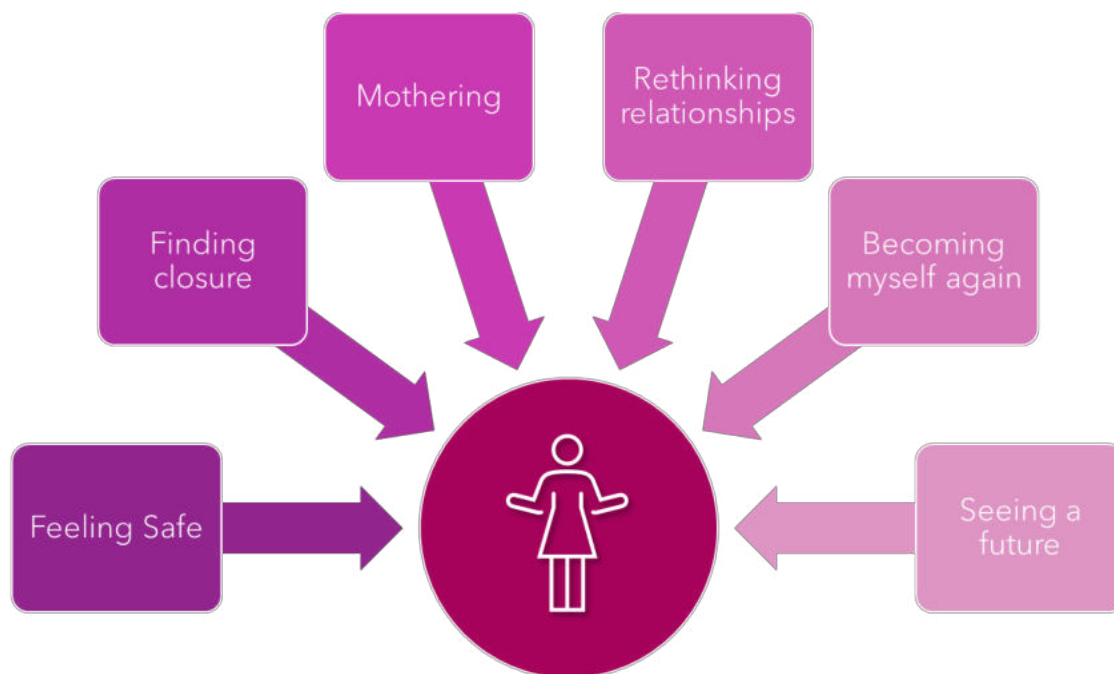


Figure 2: Women's internal considerations in the post-separation phase

### Feeling safe

**Ensuring physical and emotional safety for themselves and their children was critical to women in the post-separation period.** Some women spoke of experiencing ongoing harassment, threats, and abuse in the post-separation period. For example, Xi Hui (P2) described her ex-spouse's intimidating behaviour and verbal abuse towards her during an access visit in a public space.

*So first time see the father right but then because I, I had the court letter black and white already said if you see the children you are not allowed to drink and smoke... I must be there with her (their child) okay. So the first time he already sitting down at the coffee shop, he drink okay, already drink. ... Then he just scold vulgarity words ... got a lot of people looking at me, I stay firm, I just don't care about him because children is more important. Then if he do anything to me at least I got people to look. So if not anything just call the police. ... he like to bully those weaken people then he will feel very strong. So now like my mindset is like to protect my child first, call police, anything call police. (Xi Hui, P2)*

In the post-separation stage, women also spoke of managing their own physical and psychological recovery from chronic abuse.

*"After my escape, actually I spend quite long time being depressed and moving on from the denial stage to acceptance and at that time it was really terrible that there was also*

*trauma bond that is, trauma bond if you know is actually like drug that you will have a lot of emotion attached and you have to break the bond. It's quite difficult." (Xing Ling, P5)*

Despite the challenges of the post-separation period, participants reflected positively on being away from the negativity and volatility, and disempowerment that characterised their lives whilst in the abusive relationship.

*"We don't have to have that anxiety anymore or that constant fighting and arguing, oh how peaceful life is ... "(Sylvie, P4)*

*"All this (legal proceedings for maintenance) is happening, so it means a lot of financial burden on me but ... still it's better than violence at home. To be feeling so claustrophobic, for the kids to be so growing up in a very negative environment you know ..." (Saanvi, P9)*

*"... after the counselling it's really helpful. Then I ensure that I have the job security, I can earn and my children are quite well behaved. They have school, everything is settled then I think it's all right. Yeah so, so I don't have any worries, yah." (Xin Ling, P5)*

For many participants, **an important part of feeling safe was ensuring the welfare of their children.**

*"I was contemplating "How am I going to do this.. How am I going to... Which process am I going to go through... How am I going to keep [redacted; child's name] safe you know..." Because it wasn't about the money... It was more of the physical safety that I needed to be in and for her to be in."(Sylvie, P4)*

Away from the relationship, Saanvi noted that her children were coping better, and she took pride in seeing her daughter visibly blossom.

*"Finances is one but the mental peace when I see peace at home now (that) my kids are doing well. In school, they flourish, they're growing up, and my daughter (is) like blossoming! If I show you her picture when he was around... And in 1 and a ½ years, she has blossomed." (Saanvi, P9)*

However, for other participants, continuing to share joint custody for the children meant that they could not find emotional safety even after separating from their ex-spouse.

*"Like now, my son's passport has expired. And I don't know what on earth is happening... That even if you're divorced and have sole care and control, I can't apply (for) the passport unless he is signing the paper! I can't get the valid passport without his signature. And then tomorrow he's going to harass my son till I don't know what's gonna happen..." (Jia Qi, P10)*

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## Mothering

For women who were mothers, their children were central to their decision-making to stay, leave the relationship and throughout the decision-making in the post-separation process. Participants' fear of losing children also factored into all aspects of the post-separation decision making process (e.g. getting a PPO or filing for divorce).

*"So I have to fill up my own security, job security and financial security as well.. I just prefer to have divorce done, at least I have custody. I can take care of my children legally without being sued by kidnapping.... I have (the) chance of being sued for kidnapping if he wants to." (Xin Ling, P5)*

One of the greatest fears expressed by women was their ability to carry the burden of mothering as a single parent in the post-separation period.

*"And I realised that staying for your kids is not a good base foundation to continue a marriage, you know, because it's just unfair. You're putting all the pressure on your kids. Oh, it's because of you I'm here, but I'm not happy.... So I was thinking. So I was scared, I was like, how am I going to take care of a human alone, right? (Devi, P7)*

In addition to juggling life and work as a single parent, participants described the challenges of co-parenting with an ex-spouse who was abusive.

*"And then I can't co-parent with him because he's so abusive and he was never present, but I know that I still have to..." (Devi, P7)* Participants faced **difficulties in co-parenting during and after divorce proceedings. Some perceived that their ex-spouse intentionally created difficulties for them to parent the children as part of their post-separation abuse tactics.** Such interactions were so taxing, some women decided not to pursue court-ordered entitlements to avoid having to continue interacting with their ex-spouse. The following exchange between Jia Qi (P10) and Saanvi (P9) in the focus group highlighted the common struggle for women. Both chose to foot the bill for children's' expenses despite court ordered maintenance for their ex-spouses to contribute to their children's living expenses.

*"....So, my son's a new year, right? There's school books, right?" (P10, Jia Qi)*

*"Yeah, I pay for everything, it's the same." (P9, Saanvi)*

*"Because if you ask him, it's another lawyer coming, you know? 'Why does he need this book?' 'Why does he need this extra shirt?' 'Why does he need these socks?' But according to the court ruling, he's supposed to pay all these. But in order to get all these executed, I have to go through hell! And it's all that trauma... I go through hell to do certain things. And I'm thinking, 'Why should I do that?' I mean the school is like, what? \$80? So you want me to go through hell to get \$80? And he knows, you know? And that's how he plays the game." (P10, Jia Qi)*

As noted earlier, one woman faced the difficult decision to not pursue custody of her children in divorce proceedings due to the spouse being able to better provide for the children's material needs. However, caring for children's physical, emotional and material welfare remained important, even where they did not have day-to-day care of their children. Xin Ling (P5) expressed concerns that her ex-spouse was using his stronger financial position to undermine her role as a mother and triangulate the children. She admitted she had to reconcile her feelings of knowing that her ex-spouse could financially provide more for her children.

*"Then another challenge is that whenever he sees the children, he will provide the best, like the food, like toys, spoiling them with toys. This is like .. They are too young, when they have a lot of gifts they want to eat more, everything they want and like those times he tells the kids 'Your mama don't, cannot afford this, I can buy for you. Your mama cannot buy you the toy, which toy you want, oh you want this one, no I will buy you that big?' It's like that type, if you come back to me I will buy it for you, your mama cannot buy. Yeah but I myself can provide care and authentic love as a mother. That's how I found my place." (Xin Ling, P5)*

For Xin En (P8), who had escaped the abusive relationship and left the children with her ex-spouse at the family home, rebuilding and maintaining her relationship with the children after leaving the relationship was a priority.

*"So I will just tell them, uh, every month I will message (my children) and ask them how are you? I don't want to have regrets. Just in case... I believe they will come back. Must give them a bit time because they don't understand. They thought that I had abandoned them. Because their father had told them that... Which I also angry with what he say. He shouldn't cause a divide between my children and I. But it doesn't matter because I know God will help me..." (Xin En, P8)*

Participants also spoke about managing the children's coping after leaving their ex-spouses, particularly if their ex-spouses had been abusive towards the children as well.

*"So the trauma test was done, the Divorce Support Specialist Agency (DSSA), because he wanted to see them, so they were sent to the DSSA for, you know, assessment. So the assessment was done. They both were... turns out they have PTSD. They have post-trauma because they have gone through that..." (Saanvi, P9)*

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### **Rethinking relationships**

For participants in this study, **the experience of leaving an abusive relationship provided an opportunity to reflect on their understanding and beliefs about marriage, as well as their understanding of abuse.**

*"... initially I had internalised, I thought, normalised violence, and I thought that this, every family has hidden violence and never talks about it." (Saanvi, P9)*

Pranshi (P6) reflected on being in a "sacred marriage" which meant that she never questioned the abuse she experienced from both her husband and his parents who lived with them.

*"But he always goes out with guys or ladies. I never ask him any questions. But he won't let me go out with my parents, my aunties, or my family members. He always asks me to just (stay) at home, I have to clean up the house. They dirty the house, I clean up. I do all the housework, everything. Even though I do cooking, he lies to the court, say that I never do any cooking. Never cleaning. Always go out." (Pranshi, P6)*

For several women, their hopes and preconceptions of marriage were shattered early on.

*"...the relationship ended right after I got married ... 'cause that's when the abuse started." (Devi, P7)*

*"... think maybe it took me so long to realise that I should go and seek help because I also don't want to let go of the marriage. Because I believe that, you know you are a married couple, when you are together for so long, you are supposed to work things out, you are not supposed to just give up on each other." (Amirah, P3)*

For participants, the post-separation process involved them having to revisit what was important to them in a relationship. **Concepts that surfaced involved setting boundaries, wanting to have a say in a relationship, and having someone who showed care and love.**

*"So, looking back when I think about it, it is obvious that I love him more than he loves me. So, one thing I tell myself is that when I go into a new relationship, I always make sure that the guy thinks and puts your needs first instead of his." (Amirah, P3)*

*"You know, just look after yourself, because once you start looking after yourself, you will know what you want, what are your boundaries, what you don't want, what you think is not right for you, what is right for you. So, based on that you will carve your own path. Then you just go forth and never look back." (Devi, P7)*

Some participants grieved the relationship post-separation, and the lack of care and value they experienced as a wife. For Sylvie (P4), she had to grieve over the loss of the person she thought she had married, when she realised the lack of care and love he had for her after she was diagnosed with a chronic illness.

*"Why I decided to leave him is because, first of all, he was really unsupportive in my [chronic illness], and I mean really unsupportive. Because again, it was about him... So he would now have a deformed wife, right? And he would have to now take care of me, which he wasn't going to do and he didn't. So, that's when I guess, I started analysing a little, where did this come from, what kind of personality do you need to have in order to make, if one that you've been with for 20 years, gets a disease like that..."*

*(crying). That to me was... Honestly, I could not comprehend it. I still don't comprehend it but it's okay." (Sylvie, P4)*

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### **Finding closure**

**During the post-separation phase, participants also identified that a priority was finding closure and attaining a sense of finality to the abusive relationship.**

For Xin En (P8), having closure to the relationship gave her the clarity to think about her hopes and dreams for the future.

*"Currently I feel more peaceful. Because I think when I am more peaceful, I have more clarity). At the point in time, I cannot think. I really cannot think...I needed somewhere quiet, to talk to myself...Ask what do I want? I'm in my forties already. What do I want actually in my life? then, uh, I heard that. I heard what my inner soul was telling me. So I know what my direction is now. (Xin En, P8)*

However, for Jia Qi (P10), who still shared co-parenting responsibilities with her ex-spouse, it was hard to envision closure. The following exchange between participants in the focus group highlights the ongoing tense nature of negotiations with an ex-spouse post-separation that can affect women's sense of closure.

*Sylvie (P4) to Jia Qi (P10): "Why didn't you have any closure for yourself?"*

*Jia Qi: "How do you have closure if you have joint custody? Yeah, but when can... I am very sure that when they say 'til death do we depart', it's literal you know? Because you got joint custody. How am I going to separate with this man?"*

*Saanvi (P9): "Until 18 right? After that..."*

*Sylvie: "Until 21, unfortunately."*

*Jia Qi: "Yeah, but then they have to go school. The shared price cost for the university. You've to deal with him. All the medical expenses he's supposed to pay. He changed the court ruling. So, I have to tell him in advance when the children are sick..."*

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### **Becoming myself again**

**A common sentiment that participants expressed was feeling that they had lost themselves in the abusive relationship.** They described having to suppress their needs, wants and desires to conform to their ex-spouses' demands, particularly when speaking up for themselves was met with abuse.

*"So, always every day they giving us like pain, torture, and a lot of issues. So this one I had to overcome, I just quiet, quiet, quiet only. So I just go to work, I just*

come back, just quiet. So, I got no piece of fun, everything. Before, he will bring me out for outing, go makan<sup>5</sup> everything. After we get the new flat already, he always intentionally go with his parents only, rather than, you know, show me any concern or love anything. So I just kept it to myself, just carry on to do my own work." (Pranshi, P6)

The following focus group exchange describes how living with abuse affected women's behaviour and identity. Participants shared similar experiences that being in the relationship their ex-spouses' expectations would change constantly.

"Cause you kind of adapt your behaviour according to what's expected... his expectations would be whatever... would change constantly" (Jia Qi, P10)

(laughs) "It's a moving target" (Saanvi, P9)

"You might well, get in trouble kind of thing, right? So, you basically stop being yourself because..." (P4, Sylvie)

"You lost your identity. You lost your identity." (Jia Qi, P10)

"Yeah. I had totally lost myself, like everything I say, I wanted after, would be taken differently and he would react to that. Like walking (on) eggshells." (Saanvi, P9)

For many women, leaving the demands of their ex-spouses gave them the **space to pursue their own wants and desires and re-connect to the person they were before**. This also included being free to re-engage with family from whom they were restricted from having contact when in the abusive relationship.

"After marriage, I cannot have any hobbies. I cannot invite my family members and friends. I was isolated and not happy. This morning I go to kpop fitness class with children. It's like family bonding. Find back myself. That I enjoy my life. That I'm working hard." (Xin Ling, P5)

"Previously I was very playful, go for courses and hobbies like badminton, cycling, swimming). But he restricted me. After I met him, I lost everything. My happiness, my love. Now my parents are my first priority. Now I'm getting more involved in courses. Giving tuition to my nieces and nephews. I'm back to my family again." (Pranshi, P6)

For Amirah (P3) in particular, **re-discovering herself was about regaining control over her financial situation**, as she described how she had lost skills and competencies in managing money during the relationship because her ex-spouse had controlled all aspects of their finances.

"... at least he is now out of the question, after the 4 years is done, I can start back, to make sure my cash and everything is okay and I can have credit cards again, you know? And manage my money all on my own, not by him. Can travel.

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<sup>5</sup> Makan – to eat



*Hopefully next time I can get my degree but it is just I don't know which one I should get into, so many options, yea." (Amirah, P3)*

In the post-separation period, women also had to **renegotiate their identity as a divorced/single woman/mother against entrenched societal stereotypes and expectations**. Devi (P7) spoke of the lack of recognition of women's strength and resilience to take action and protect themselves and their children in the face of violence.

*"I think the hardest thing was about how I cope with the child really, being a single mother. Because there are so many stories, like scary stories around being a single mother. Like you can't do this, you can't do that, people will look down on you. And I was like, why? Shouldn't people look up to you because you actually made the decision for your child? And you know, so many things like, oh, what about in the future? You can't date. Even if you date, you know, he won't accept you with your child. I was like, oh my god, it's 2022. Who thinks that way?" (Devi, P7)*

Jia Qi (P10) expressed consciousness of how women who leave a relationship are perceived by society; as well the impact on children, and talked about having a 'script' for the children if asked why their parents are no longer together

*"So I told my children if your friend ever ask you why you parents split up, huh they split up, why, then you say to them, adults lah they are like that, they don't get along already, different in life they cannot get along, got conflict in character, two of them don't get along that's why they split." (Jia Qi, P10)*

Participants were highly sensitised to negative perceptions of divorce, which manifested in the backlash of family members.

*"When I was in the shelter... My ex's family members called me and told me so many funny things to tell me to stop the divorce. It's because of their face, their image in front of their relatives. And also they told me, because I am a Christian, I have to love my enemies, so I have to stay in the marriage. They told me 'So are you Christian? Are you serious? You believe in Jesus for so many years and you cannot love your enemy?'" (Xin Ling, P5)*

*"Because in India, divorce is still kind of taboo. It's taken as somebody going for divorce is oh she gave up. Yah it's something that my family hasn't divorce yet. I'm the first one. So that tells you how much of a taboo it is and in my husband's family there's been, ex-husband's family, there have been 2, 3 divorces but in my side of the family, I'm the first one. So it took me a long time to even educate myself that this is not right, you are sticking around a person that almost killed you and your kids." (Saanvi, P9)*

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### Seeing a future

Despite the enormity of the challenges they faced, being out of the abusive relationship enabled women to begin envisioning a hopeful future for themselves and their children. **This vision of the future often included the chance to acknowledge pains experienced from the relationship, and still move on from the traumatic experience.**

Being in a safe environment post-separation also presented an opportunity for women to live up to their potential and enabled their self-efficacy to grow.

*"In the beginning I was scared, now I am free and no need to be fearful." (Praneeta, P1)*

Women shared their hopes and dreams for the future which they were only able to voice and visualise after they had decided to leave the abusive relationship. From young, Praneeta (P1) wanted to become a teacher. For Xin Ling (P5) and Pranshi (P6) it was about having their own home.

*"I want to have my flat only, so that my parents can come up to the house. And I think I can come up with my new life." (Pranshi, P6)*

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### Summary

This section highlighted important internal considerations for women from leaving the abusive relationship and in the post-separation phase. These concepts underpinned the decisions women made. Women sought physical and emotional safety, finality, and closure especially when pursuing divorce and custody processes. The welfare of their children was a priority. Moving through the post-separation transition offered women an opportunity to find themselves again and reflect on what is important to them from relationships. Even when challenges were far from over, women could see a future away from the abusive relationship. The next section explores women's help-seeking behaviour post-separation.

### WOMEN'S HELP-SEEKING

We explored with participants the extent of help-seeking, and the barriers and enablers to disclosing their experience of abuse while still in the relationship and post-separation. Participants identified a range of formal and informal supports as they moved through the post-separation decisions and challenges. During individual interviews, participants highlighted that support came in various forms such as through work, family, friends, social services, the presence of a PPO and spiritual and religious groups. While some women had good family and social support and an awareness of where they could seek help from, others struggled with the sense of loneliness in having to navigate the post-separation process with little support.

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### **The complexity of disclosure**

Across the group of participants, it was clear there was ambivalence in disclosure and reporting. What also emerged from this study is the complexity of disclosure about domestic abuse for both the victim/survivor of abuse, as well as to those in the ecosystem around them.

Many participants revealed that they did not disclose their experience of abuse for a long time (or not at all). There were several reasons for their hesitancy to disclose incidents of abuse earlier. Underlying emotions and concerns related to **shame and stigma for staying in an abusive relationship for so long and pressures from families and friends to stay for the sake of family values and/or children.**

During focus group discussions, participants expressed their feelings of **self-doubt and hesitation to disclose domestic violence.** One participant noted that women who go through violence often try to show the world that they are okay, and that she herself used to only show the world that she and her ex-spouse were happy. She expressed that it was shameful to admit and that throughout the violence, she would think that something was wrong with herself. Participants shared about their hesitation to disclose to family members, with some **concerned about worrying their elderly parents by disclosing the abuse they had suffered over many years, while others were uncertain about their family's response towards their ex-spouses.**

*In terms of family support, I don't tell much to my parents and my siblings because I don't want to make them worried. Because they are the kind of person that when they know that something happens to me, they will go all out, they will probably burn down his house. (Amirah, P3)*

**The decision to disclose is loaded, with a sense of finality that came from disclosure.** Participants explained that they feared provoking their ex-spouses and violence escalating, as well as their children finding out about the mental torture that they have been hiding. Yet, on the other hand, participants also wished that others around them would show more care and concern by reaching out or checking in on them. However, some participants reflected that support from friends needed to be nuanced and empathetic, as it could add to the existing self-blame they were already holding.

Participants expressed that they were aware that the relationship was harmful and expressed a desire to reach out for help, but they were not confident that breaking the secrecy would improve their situation. It seems like **there is an internal conflict between fear of violence (if they stay) and fear of escalation (if they disclose), and it is a decision between which option can provide them with a greater sense of control and whether the benefits outweigh the cost.**

The range of factors at play and how this interplay of considerations has a mental impact on women taking steps to change their situation is summarised by Saanvi (P9) who never spoke about her situation to even her closest friends.

*"... I never ever spoke about these things to even my closest friends. That is the biggest mistake of my life because I thought that I'm protecting my family, my husband like, I was concealing it because I need to have a family. I need to be married, I need to be with uh you know, my kids I have to do this.*

*So that mental mindset has really kind of paralysed me like, no I have to, this is family and I have to do anything to even, to show the world that this is perfect, and nothing is wrong. From my Facebook account nobody even made out that he could be that violent to me. It looked all okay, family portraits and you know, smiling faces but only my family knows and my maid has seen everything."*  
(Saanvi, P9)

Stigma and challenging attitudes also play a role. Amirah (P3) talked to her parents, telling them that there is really nothing wrong with being a single parent, but they said that a child needs a father.

*"It's already imprinted in their head that single parent means not complete. Family is not complete."* (Amirah, P3)

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### **Formal supports**

Formal support systems that women had reached out to include the Police, Family Justice Court, Family Service Centres, Care Corner Project StART, women's crisis shelter, Divorce Support Specialist Centres, Shelter, and non-profit organisations such as AWARE.

Women generally expressed satisfaction with police support and noted that the police officers educated them about their rights and importance to apply for the Personal Protection Orders (PPO) to deter future acts of violence. Some women highlighted that they only realised the urgency to apply for the PPO after police officers stressed the necessity of a PPO before further intervention could be taken by the police.

Women also generally felt that social workers from Family Service Centres and Care Corner Project Start provided an empathic and non-judgemental approach which helped to ease their discomfort and uncertainty regarding disclosure of abuse. Xin Ling (P5) noted that unlike confiding in her friends who do not have the skills and knowledge to help her, speaking with a trained professional provided her with important information regarding key processes such as PPO and DEO, which gave her the confidence on the steps she needed to take.

Women who had attended the Post-separation Intimate Partner Violence Support Group Work at CCPS reflected that the group support experience provided them with a sense of community and the knowledge that they were not alone enabled them to share freely with others.

*"It's really helpful.... When it came to group discussion, it's like a safe place where I can talk freely and nobody will judge you. And similar situation is going on (with them), it feels like a new community." (Xin Ling, P5)*

Besides that, Xin Ling (P5) who had received support from crisis shelter noted that beyond providing safe accommodation for women and children, she was appreciative of the extra mile that crisis shelter staff had extended to her in the form of childcare support, counselling services, and stable internet connection which enabled her to attend job interviews and subsequently work meetings that were conducted online.

Participants also spoke positively of support from other organisations including AWARE's pro bono legal clinic, which provided women with practical legal advice that was crucial in their decision-making during the post-separation period. Saanvi (P9) was also grateful for the timely psychological intervention provided by the Divorce Support Specialist Centres for her children who were diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of the abuse.

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### **Informal supports**

Besides formal support, women also tapped into their informal networks for advice and support during the post-separation period, which can include family, friends, and colleagues.

While family and friends are commonly the first individuals to whom women disclose abuse, in some cases, this can contribute to victim blame. This is especially so when family and friends' responses to women's disclosure of abuse triggered women's sense of guilt for not prioritising their children's needs and unintentionally conveyed disappointment at women's life trajectory.

*"Of course my parents have been supportive with me and the child, but the occasional "(sigh) see what you've done with your life"; "(sigh) see if you didn't do this you would be much more successful". It's always the (sigh) and I'm like okay, okay, fine, I get it. And then there's so many other challenges, like I'm a single parent, right?" (Devi, P7)*

Nonetheless, supportive advice and friends who respected women's autonomy were instrumental in keeping women moving forward when they felt pressured by their ex-spouses during the post-separation period.

*"When I applied for the PPO, and the summons went to his house, another 50 missed calls. And a lot of threatening texts from different numbers ... So he tried his best but you know my best friend was firm. He said, "Be firm, Devi. Be firm. Do not fall into this trap." (Devi, P7)*

*"Actually they (my friends) don't support me to divorce, but they say that they respect my decision. Because a lot of things are choices that we made...They understand the hurt. But eventually, it's a choice...I feel at least somebody can understand me." (Xin En, P8)*

In the workplace, some women reported positive experiences of receiving support from their employers and viewed the work as a form of respite for them. However, others spoke of having been questioned and labelled despite their employers being aware of the

abuse. For instance, Devi (P7) was questioned by her employers about the number of leaves she had to take to attend court sessions. Similarly, Xin Ling (P5) was called out as the "woman in the shelter" during a company town hall meeting because her internet network was unstable.

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### Summary

This section explored women's decision to disclose their experience of abuse and their help-seeking behaviour. The decision to disclose abuse was shown to be complex and fraught for women. Women drew on a range of formal and informal supports during the post-separation period.

## DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand abused women's decision-making processes post-separation and the influences, motivations, contexts and conditions that give rise to certain decisions. It was clear that physically leaving an abusive relationship is but the first step on the (often long) journey to freedom from abuse. Our research revealed that the post-separation period for women involves significant hurdles as women navigate a multitude of complex decision points and external tasks and processes. At the same time, there are internal processes, competing factors and considerations that affect the decisional balance. It was evident that many women navigate the post-separation period with little awareness of what is involved, and limited formal and informal support.

### AMBIVALENCE IN DECISION-MAKING

As depicted in the image below (Figure 3), our research has further shown that the post-separation phase can be incredibly challenging and characterised by the 'unknown' (external tasks and processes) and uncertainty (internal feelings). Safety can be an illusion, as research shows that often women are less safe having left the abuser than when in the relationship (Humphreys 2012, Hay, Grobbelaar et al. 2021). While women have taken the complex and long step to leaving the abusive relationship, often this is undertaken with little foresight of what is to come. This may contribute to the ambivalence women show in the decision to leave, often leaving and returning several times. Reaching the point of freedom and empowerment may seem very far off for women while they grapple with the complexities of the post-separation period.

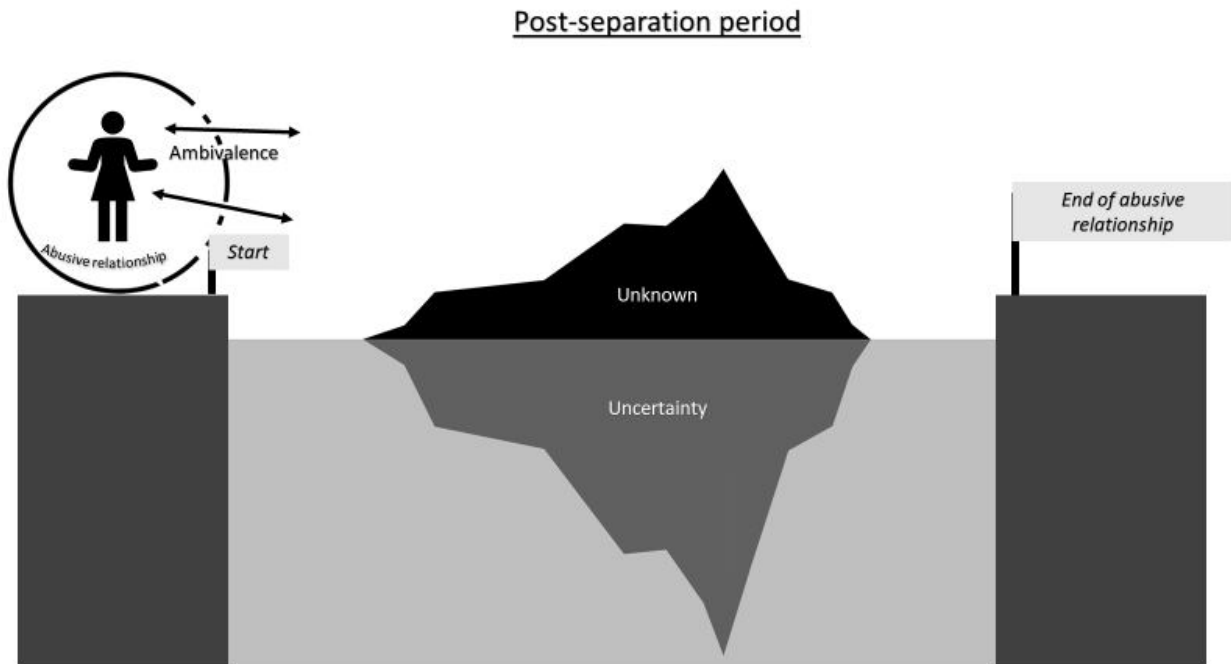


Figure 3. Ambivalence in the face of the unknown post-separation

#### POST-SEPARATION DECISIONS AND INTERNAL PROCESSES

Our study has shown that once embarking on the decision to leave an abusive relationship, women are faced with a significant number of challenges as they navigate various decision points post-separation. As depicted in Figure 4 below, our participants shed light on the vast range of external tasks, processes, and decision points along the post-separation journey after ending a relationship characterised by abuse. The key decisions centred around: managing ongoing safety (applying for/enforcing a PPO); where to live short- and long-term (housing); whether to pursue a divorce/seek custody/resolve ancillary matters through the courts; navigating co-parenting with an abusive ex-spouse; continuing and/or seeking employment; and achieving financial stability and independence.

The women's stories highlighted that the post-separation processes are often complex, the steps in the journey are not linear and some processes, such as divorce and resolution of ancillary matters can take many years to resolve. Consistent with prior research, for some women in our study, their experience of the family law system and court processes mirrored the dynamics of the abusive relationship (Laing 2017, Katirai 2020). Attempts to engage and negotiate with the abusive ex-partner to achieve a resolution through these processes was often fraught with the use of the system by ex-spouses as a post-separation tactic to maintain power and control (Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs 2013).

Our study also showed that the environment in which women make decisions is characterised by uncertainty and instability as women's housing, employment and financial situation is often

tenuous; several women in our study left the marital home with very limited financial means. Financial matters in particular appeared to play a significant role in women's decision-making, for example, determining access to legal representation, whether to pursue ancillary matters or enforcement of PPOs, decisions about care and control in divorce proceedings. Velonis and colleagues (2017) argue that to fully understand the decisions women make in the context of abuse, it is important that the support ecosystem looks beyond individual-level factors to the larger social and structural forces that impact women's lives such as poverty and employment (Velonis, Daoud et al. 2017). Our research highlighted that women's lack of access to material resources in the post-separation period can compound the disempowering of women in their decision-making.

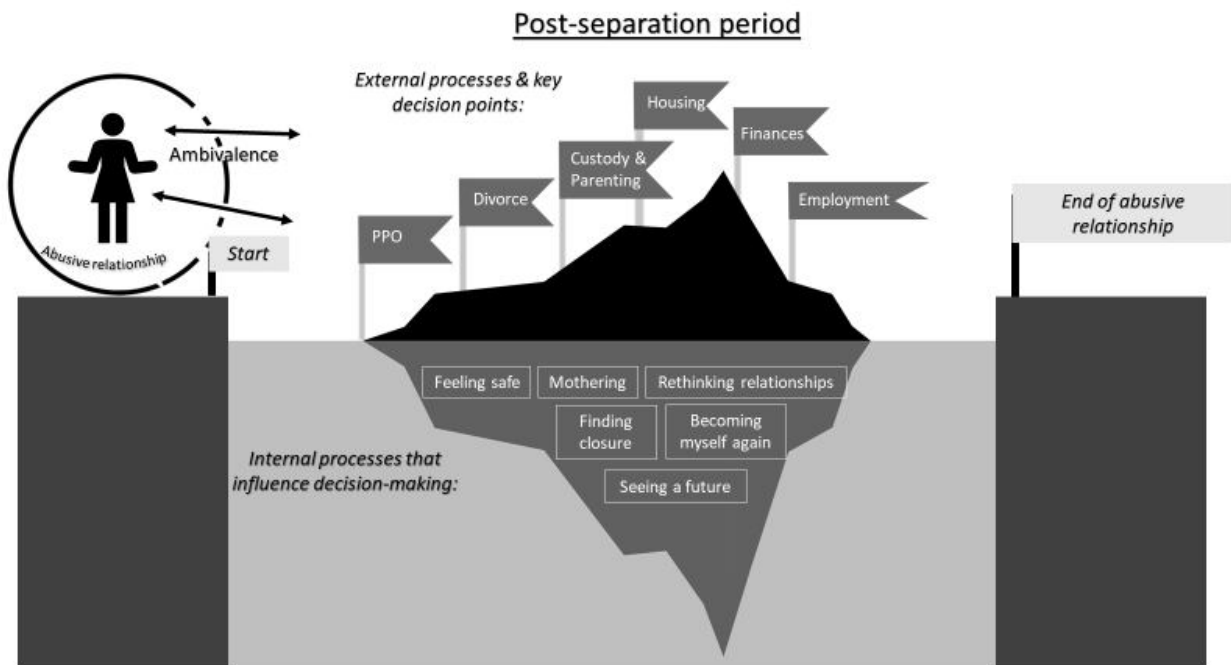


Figure 4. External decision points and women's internal processes in the post-separation period

Figure 4 also depicts the important internal considerations for women in the post-separation phase revealed by our study. Feeling physically and emotionally safe is a primary concern, but many women experience elevated abuse at the time of separating and beyond. During the post-separation period, women are also managing their own physical and psychological recovery from chronic abuse. Recent research has shown that separated women experience continuous traumatic stress (Hulley, Wager et al. 2023). Longitudinal research shows that women after separation experience significant levels of depression, PTSD symptoms and disabling chronic pain. Over time, women's health does significantly improve (Ford-Gilboe, Varcoe et al. 2023). However, it is important to recognise that women's internal safety needs are more than immediate physical



and security, but also extends to their psychological and emotional safety during the post-separation period.

Mothering emerged from our study as core focus for women as they navigated leaving and surviving the post-separation processes, consistent with prior research (Kelly 2009, Holt 2016, Francia, Milllear et al. 2020, Broughton, Ford-Gilboe et al. 2022). However, some of the decisions women made may appear at odds with a concern for the well-being of children. For example, one participant conceded care and control to her ex-spouse in the knowledge that her spouse was able to provide for the children's material needs but had reconciled within herself of her ongoing ability to provide "care and authentic love as a mother." Such nuances in women's decision making may not be apparent to services providers and others and can lead to interpretations and judgements of women as 'unprotective' mothers (Nikupeteri 2017).

As women find themselves consumed in the overwhelming range of concrete tasks, processes and decisions in the post-separation phase, women wish to achieve closure, especially when court processes become protracted.

Despite the challenges and self-doubt they faced along the way, the women in this study were clear that they and their children were better off outside the abusive relationship. The post-separation period offered women an opportunity to find themselves again, to rethink what they wanted out of relationships and to start to see a future ahead as they move towards empowerment, however slowly this journey might take. The experience of a loss of self incurred within the abusive relationship is consistent with prior research where women in other studies describe a loss of self or "fractured self" which happens gradually and upon which they only have clarity in hindsight, away from the abusive relationship (O'Doherty, Taft et al. 2016, Czerny, Lassiter et al. 2018). Described as a form of cognitive numbness, this process can affect women's ability to set boundaries within the relationship as well as affecting her inner intuition and judgement. This has implications for women's decisions to disclose and seek help from service providers.

These internal considerations identified in our research align with descriptions by others of the journey away from violence in which the initial focus on safety moves towards rebuilding a sense of self with increased control over life, towards a realisation of self and increasing participation in community life (Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2004).

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In view of the multitude of complex decision points post-separation and women's internal considerations, we identified several ways that women can be better supported to move from ambivalence to empowerment post-separation to a life free from abuse. Set out in Figure 5 below, these include: informed decision-making, fostering agency, peer support and an understanding ecosystem. We discuss these further below along with recommendations.

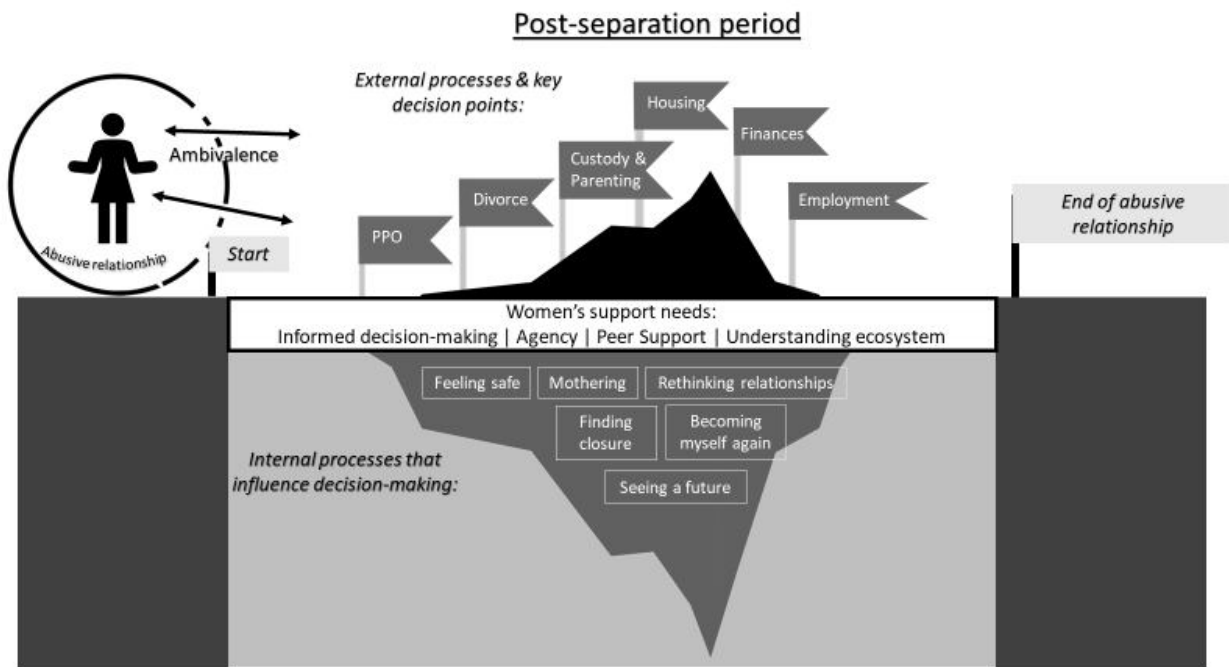


Figure 5. Supporting women through the post-separation period

## INFORMED DECISION MAKING

**Recommendation 1: Clear, consolidated, and accessible information about the tasks, processes and decisions facing women in the post-separation period**

There is an identified need to demystify the post-separation period and provide factual, objective information and resources to help signpost what women may face in the phase. To date, women may make decisions subject to inconsistent advice, stigma and judgement and it was clear from the research that most women had limited awareness of existing information available online.

To reduce the *unknown* quality of the post-separation period and to enable women to make informed decisions, we recommend consolidating existing information relating to the practical tasks, processes and decisions women may face in the post-separation period into one accessible

resource. This information could include (for example) existing online information on family violence support options, PPO, divorce, custody, housing policy and options. This resource could be supplemented with information to help with women's material needs at this time such as financial guidance, employment pathways for women. An option could be to present information in the form of a decision tree to help women to make informed decisions to understand their options, pathways, and potential impact of the decisions that they make. This does not advocate a particular course of action but can help women to understand the steps and potential consequences of particular decisions to enable more informed decision-making.

## SUPPORTING WOMEN'S AGENCY

### ***Recommendation 2: Women-defined support services that recognise women's agency***

Our research also highlighted the importance of support services understanding women's needs and frustrations as they navigate the many decisions and processes in the post-separation period, for example, protracted legal processes in the face of post-separation abuse tactics (Grauwiler 2008). For women to move from ambivalence to empowerment, support should be about increasing women's sense of control and in turn increasing their help-seeking behaviours.

At times there may be a tension between perceptions of women as victims versus agents whose choices must be respected even where these decisions are at odds with the goals of support services. As highlighted in the literature, women's decision-making in the context of abuse is not linear, is adaptive to circumstances and may change. Research shows that sequential decision problem models may not be helpful for high stakes complex decision making where there are conflicting goals and time pressures (Stork 2008).

Hence, flexibility and adaptability are needed in service provision for women facing complex circumstances such as family violence; the need for 'women-defined' support services rather than 'service-defined' support (Liang 2005 #7286). With greater understanding of the complex decisions and processes facing women in the post-separation period, and women's internal needs and processes, services can be empowered to journey with their clients according to their own timeline. Together with more informed decision-making (recommendation 1), fostering women's agency may help women to overcome their ambivalence to work through the post-separation period with more confidence and a sense of self-efficacy towards empowerment.

## PEER SUPPORT

### ***Recommendation 3: The availability of tailored support groups specifically for women navigating the post-separation period.***

The women in this study journeyed through the post-separation period with varying levels of support; some engaged with formal support at certain points, others drew on informal support. While most women drew on the support of family service centres at some point, many women appeared quite isolated in their decision-making when navigating the complex processes towards a life free from abuse. Women's agency can flourish through a non-judgemental supportive environment. Bringing together women with the same experiences may enable the sharing of resources, success stories and strengths, challenges and barriers, as well as provide important social and emotional connections to build resilience and empower women through this transition.

## UNDERSTANDING AND EMPATHETIC ECOSYSTEM

### **Recommendation 4: Educating the family violence system on women's post-separation experience**

While there was mostly positive experience of formal support, there is a need to ensure greater awareness and understanding of women's experience in the post-separation stage and the many complex challenges and considerations that influence women's decision-making. There is great potential for those in the entire family violence system (from police to social service agencies to courts), to misunderstand women's decisions with limited knowledge of what the post-separation period entails and the extent of the difficulties women face.

All services should be trauma-informed, empathetic, and non-judgemental of women's decisions. Services could be attuned not just to women's emotional support needs after leaving an abusive relationship, but to women's material needs which can play a big role in their decision to pursue/not pursue particular action (e.g., financial capacity, employment, housing). Women may have limited options, for example relying on crisis shelter or family and friends who may not always be supportive of women's decisions. There is evidence that social support, material necessities, and self-efficacy is protective against negative psychological outcomes after separation (Anderson and Saunders 2003). Having a shared understanding and consistent approach by service providers across all touch points can help to support women's agency in their decision-making to reach empowerment beyond the post-separation phase.

### **Recommendation 5: Prioritising protection needs of women and reducing stigma towards separated women**

Women in our study described the challenge of receiving support from families when deciding to leave an abusive relationship. They described pervasive traditional values from family, friends, and broader society that women should accept and tolerate the abuse rather than break up the family unit. Adherence to traditional values without understanding the impact of violence on women and children, has potential to hinder women's help-seeking behaviour.

Women who take the significant step to leave an abusive relationship should be supported to disclose their experience safely to those within their social sphere without feeling misunderstood or judged or convinced to remain and accept the abuse. Hence, education is needed to help families and individuals to understand the experience of family violence and provide non-judgemental support to women who make decisions to disclose their experience of abuse and leave the abusive relationship. Reducing societal and cultural stigma associated with experiencing family violence, being divorced and being a single mother is an important step to achieving a society that is inclusive, equal and a safe environment for future generations of Singaporeans. Greater focus should be on increasing accountability and rehabilitation of perpetrators to strengthen the stability of the family unit.

## CONCLUSION

To date, less is known about the decision-making processes of women after physically leaving an abusive relationship. Our research drawing on the lived experience of separated women in Singapore, has shown that ending the relationship is but the start of an often long and complex decision-making pathway, requiring women to make trade-offs to achieve a life free from violence for themselves and their children. Women's decision-making in the post-separation period is complex, non-linear, and adaptive to the circumstances. The contribution of our research is to concretise the 'unknown' post-separation period that is characterised by uncertainty. Our study illuminates the practical decision-points facing women in the post-separation period that relate to safety, housing, divorce, custody, financial stability, and employment. We also revealed the internal processes that are important to women in this period.

Our research has important practice implications for service providers who are supporting women at the safety/survival stage of recovery from abuse with little insights into what lies ahead in the post-separation phase. Understanding the nuances and complexities of women's challenges and decision-making considerations can provide service providers with data to offer non-judgemental support and help women move *in their own time* from ambivalence towards the end goal of empowerment.

We propose there be clearer information available for women to make informed decisions, fostering women's agency in their decision-making, providing peer support, and an understanding ecosystem providing material and social support at this precarious time.

More research is needed to elaborate on our findings with a larger sample of women with different experiences and from diverse settings. Our qualitative findings can also be enhanced by quantitative research with a broader representative sample of women to validate the factors and considerations influencing decision-making during the post-separation period. Future research can also be conducted with service providers and other professionals in the family violence ecosystem to explore their professional perspectives of women's decision-making in the post-separation period and the influence on service provision.

# APPENDICES

## A: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

### **Praneeta (P1)**

Praneeta's husband had been physically and sexually abusive towards her despite her having a PPO against him. After the latest incident of violence, Praneeta concluded that her husband would not change. Praneeta's case was also escalated to Child Protective Service, thereby prompting Anne to leave the abusive relationship. After leaving the relationship, Praneeta had to seek refuge in a crisis shelter. Praneeta's children were also removed from the matrimonial home and placed in foster care. During this time, Praneeta was pregnant with her third child and struggled with coping with the stress of leaving the relationship and with an impending delivery date. When Praneeta filed for divorce, Praneeta's husband did not agree to the divorce. Praneeta had financial difficulties and had to seek support from legal aid for the divorce proceedings.

### **Xi Hui (P2)**

Xi Hui was motivated to leave the abusive relationship as she considered the wellbeing of her young child growing up in an environment that was not safe. Xi Hui was also motivated to leave the abusive relationship as she realized that her husband had not been contributing to the family at all as she was the main breadwinner. After leaving the abusive relationship, Xi Hui struggled with juggling work and caregiving duties for her child. Xi Hui's husband also continued to use controlling tactics to compromise her employment. During divorce proceedings, Xi Hui's husband fought for custody of their child, causing Xi Hui to be very fearful for the child's welfare. Xi Hui and her husband also had many disagreements during divorce proceedings regarding child maintenance, access arrangements and housing that delayed divorce proceedings. Xi Hui is also the main caregiver for her grandmother, which increases her bandwidth tax, especially since her grandmother recently had a fall that required hospitalisation.

### **Amirah (P3)**

Amirah left the abusive relationship after tolerating many years of physical, psychological and emotional violence from her husband. Amirah left the abusive relationship and filed for divorce after an accumulation of abuse from her husband and her realization that he did not appreciate her and had narcissistic tendencies. After filing for divorce, Amirah struggled to manage her husband's family's opinion of her decision to leave the marriage. Amirah struggled with wanting to protect her husband's reputation as divorce was a taboo topic in their religion. Amirah also struggled with grieving the marriage and her feelings of loss regarding the marriage.

**Sylvie (P4)**

Sylvie had endured 20 years of physical, psychological and emotional violence characterized by coercive control by her husband. Sylvie's husband had also been abusive toward their daughter. When her husband threatened to burn the house down if she returned home one day, this prompted Sylvie to leave the matrimonial home together with her daughter. After leaving the matrimonial home, Sylvie and her daughter had to house-hop several times to find various forms of accommodation as her husband was still residing in the matrimonial home. Sylvie had also applied for a PPO against her husband for her child, but her husband had contested the PPO that she applied for her child, thereby further delaying divorce proceedings. During this time, Sylvie also fell ill with a critical illness and had to attend numerous medical appointments that were physically and mentally draining. As the sole breadwinner for the family, Sylvie also had to manage working a full-time job to support herself and her child throughout the divorce proceedings and her illness.

**Xin Ling (P5)**

Xin Ling left the abusive relationship after an accumulation of years of physical, emotionally, sexual and financial abuse from her husband. Xin Ling's husband had also been abusive to their children. This prompted Xin Ling to leave the abusive relationship by moving out of the matrimonial home and into a crisis shelter. After leaving the matrimonial home with the children, Xin Ling struggled financially as she had been financially dependent on her husband. Xin Ling's husband had wiped out their joint bank account, leaving her with no savings to sustain herself and their children. As it had been many years since Xin Ling was in the workforce, Xin Ling struggled to find employment to support herself and her children. During divorce proceedings, Xin Ling's husband also continued to communicate with their children via video-call, and would often speak badly about Xin Ling to their young children. As Xin Ling was experiencing traumatic symptoms from the abusive relationship, she also struggled to cope emotionally whilst simultaneously caring for her 3 young children. Xin Ling also faced pressure from her family to return to her abusive husband due to their religion.

**Pranshi (P6)**

Pranshi had endured 6 years of abuse from her husband, and eventually decided to leave the abusive relationship after an incident where her husband and his parents were violent towards her. Pranshi filed for a PPO after that incident of violence and subsequently left the abusive relationship. During divorce proceedings, Pranshi's husband would consistently intentionally delay court proceedings about the division of assets and ancillary matters by changing his mind or submitting incomplete documents. At one point during divorce proceedings, he also asked Pranshi to revoke her PPO in exchange for acceding to her requests regarding ancillary matters. As Pranshi was continuing to stay in the matrimonial flat with her husband after filing for divorce, Pranshi's husband would continue to use psychological violence on her to invoke fear. Pranshi also faced financial difficulty due to the delaying of court proceedings that resulted in very high legal fees.

**Devi (P7)**

Devi's husband Sebastian pushed and threw a chair towards Devi during her pregnancy. After Sebastian missed the first prenatal appointment, Devi made the decision to leave the marital relationship as she realized that Sebastian did not care for their child and had made multiple unfulfilled promises to change his behavior. During the divorce proceedings, Devi had to take multiple days off work, which affected her finances as she had to fork out high legal fees. She also found it difficult to focus on work as Sebastian would send love letters to her work email. When her people around her knew that she was going through divorce, some had questioned how she was going to cope as a single mother and told her that she will not be able to date again.

**Xin En (P8)**

When Xin En found out that Ben is having an extra-marital affair, their relationship soured and Kelvin became emotionally abusive towards her. Xin En told herself that she would endure in the marriage for the sake of her children. However, the emotional abuse became physical, and Xin En realized that she could no longer stay in the marriage with Kelvin. Xin En shared that it took a long time for her to decide on divorce as her family members had tried to dissuade her for the sake of the children. When she eventually decided to file for the divorce, she had had to make the painful decision of not contesting for child custody as it would incur higher legal costs and felt that Kelvin would be a more stable financial provider for the children. As a result, Xin En's children misunderstood that Xin En had abandoned them and stopped responding to her text messages. After leaving the marital home, Xin En also faced difficulties in securing stable accommodation for herself as she was unable to purchase subsidized housing from the government due to the existing housing policy.

**Saanvi (P9)**

Saanvi had endured about 20 years of spousal violence, but the tipping point for her was when she found out that Derrick had resorted to physical violence towards their daughter, who later told her that she felt unsafe to be alone with Derrick. Saanvi shared that when the divorce proceedings started, Derrick defaulted on multiple court sessions, did not comply with the child maintenance court order, and subsequently left Singapore at the advice of his mother, who told him that the court order will not be enforced when he is out of the country's jurisdiction. Derrick had also tried to delay the divorce proceedings by filing for at least 3 court appeal orders.

**Jia Qi (P10)**

Ji Qi recalls a long history of physical and emotional violence from Marvin which the couple had effectively hidden from the rest of their family and friends. She eventually decided to file for a PPO for herself and her 2 sons after an incident of physical violence which caused her to sustain injuries. Ji Qi shared feelings of loneliness as she had to navigate the divorce process on her own without much legal and financial support from her family and statutory systems (i.e. legal aid). Her family members had also misunderstood her as being "overdramatic" and did not offer much support to her and her children. As a sole caregiver for her children, Ji Qi shared difficulties in single



parenting especially when her children were showing trauma symptoms from the impact of abuse and divorce.

**Si Ling (P11)**

Si Ling had decided to leave the marital relationship as Peter had continued to use physical violence on her after her parents-in-law had told him to cease his use of violence. Si Ling also felt that she deserved to be treated better, and this sentiment was reinforced by her friends. As Si Ling had left the matrimonial home without her children, she had to coordinate with Peter regarding her access with the children. However, communications between them were often tense. Hence, Si Ling was hoping that through the divorce proceedings, there can be clearer terms regarding child access arrangements.

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