

*Neighbours,  
Friends and  
Families:*

*Understanding  
Woman Abuse*



*Neighbours, Friends & Families*

# Understanding Woman Abuse

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## *What is Woman Abuse?*

Woman abuse refers to violence by a woman's current or former spouse, intimate partner, or dating partner. It clearly acknowledges women are often the victims of abuse and men are most often the perpetrators of abuse. While abuse most often occurs within an intimate heterosexual relationship, it also occurs within gay and lesbian relationships. Woman abuse may involve physical or sexual assault, emotional abuse and/or control of finances and access to family, friends and community. Woman abuse hurts, damages, humiliates, isolates, intimidates, traps and sometimes kills.

## *Why the term Woman Abuse?*

Why use the term "woman abuse" rather than "domestic violence", "family violence", "intimate partner violence" or the many other terms that are often used interchangeably to describe the abusive situations that women experience? Abuse is a more inclusive term than 'violence'. Using the term "woman abuse" acknowledges that women's experience of violence is rooted in the social economic and political inequality of women. (See Social Context of Woman Abuse section). Using the term 'woman abuse' captures a wide spectrum of behaviours, including physical and sexual violence, and does not exclude the existence of other seriously abusive acts including control, intimidation, threats, and isolation. Abuse survivors relate that the non-physical forms of abuse can often be just as devastating as physical abuse.

The term 'woman abuse' acknowledges that women experience abuse at the hands of intimate partners in far greater numbers than men in our society. Women also experience more severe physical injury and trauma, emotional, social and economic impact as a result of the violence than men do. Statistics on the experiences of men indicate that their experiences are less severe and the impacts less devastating.

Women of different races, poor and older women, disabled and deaf women, lesbians, immigrant and refugee women, and geographically isolated women can be more vulnerable to abuse and they experience more barriers to seeking and receiving supportive services.

## *What does Woman Abuse Look Like?*

Woman abuse can affect the physical, emotional, spiritual, sexual, and financial wellbeing of women. The impact on each of these areas will be different for every woman. You may not see any signs of abuse (i.e. physical injuries or marks), but that doesn't mean the warning signs aren't present.

## *Physical abuse*

Physical abuse is the most commonly understood form of violence. It includes hitting, choking, pushing, punching, slapping, kicking, hair pulling, stabbing, or mutilation. All forms of physical violence are crimes under the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

The effects of physical abuse can include:

- Death
- Permanent disability (blindness, deafness, epilepsy, loss of mobility)
- Broken bones
- Head or spinal injuries
- Reproductive or gynecological problems
- Harm to unborn baby or birth defects
- Infertility
- Broken teeth, cuts, headaches, concussion
- Bruises, pain, trauma
- Isolation (hiding the injuries)

## *Emotional or Psychological Abuse*

Emotional abuse (also referred to as psychological or verbal abuse) includes insults, humiliation, yelling, put-downs, threats, harming pets or damaging property.

The effects of emotional abuse can include:

- Feeling 'crazy' or insane
- Living in constant fear
- Feeling worthless/ useless
- Low self-esteem
- Feeling depressed
- Feeling out of control
- Mental illness
- Anxiety and worry
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Eating and sleeping problems
- Post traumatic stress disorder
- Loss of energy, apathy
- Loss of community and culture
- Self-blame and self-harm

## *Spiritual Abuse*

Spiritual abuse includes preventing the expression of spiritual or religious beliefs, preventing her from attending a place of worship, and putting down or making fun of religious beliefs, traditions or cultures.

The effects of spiritual abuse can include:

- Loss of sense of self
- Feelings of hopelessness and isolation
- Loss of culture
- Loss of connection to one's faith community

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## *Sexual Abuse*

Sexual abuse includes sexual exploitation, unwanted sexual touching, rape, and other sexual activities considered by the victim to be degrading, humiliating, painful, and carried out without consent, without the ability to consent, or against a person's will, obtained by force, or threat of force, or intimidation.

The effects of sexual abuse can include:

- Feelings of shame, guilt, or embarrassment
- Suicidal thoughts/tendencies
- Poor body image
- Low self-esteem
- Feeling depressed
- Inability to have healthy sexual relationships
- Reproductive and gynecological problems
- Sexual promiscuity
- Eating and sleeping disorders
- Unwanted pregnancy
- Loss of energy, apathy
- Post traumatic stress disorder
- Self-blame and self-harm

## *Social Context of Woman Abuse*

Woman abuse exists as a result of complex, multifaceted factors, which include, but are not limited to:

### **1. Gender role stereotypes**

Traditional stereotypes (about men and women) limit the choices we make in our daily lives. Gender role stereotypes often compel men to be tough and controlling, and women to be passive and obedient. Historically, men have held the majority of decision making power in society; while there have been some changes over the last 30 years regarding the gender roles of men and women, male-dominated power and control still exists within our society. Some examples include: women's under representation in political parties; women still shoulder the main responsibility for child care and unpaid work inside the home; women earn less income compared to men (70 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterpart) and fewer women occupy senior positions in business than men.

### **2. The socialization of girls and boys**

The messages we receive as children stay with us as we become adults. Some kids grow up learning that men are supposed to be tough and controlling and women are supposed to be passive and obedient. These kinds of stereotypes are harmful because they teach a child that being male is more desirable and more valued than being female. When family, friends and others in the community expose children to gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes, children learn to act in ways that support gender inequalities.

### **3. Violence in the media**

Media plays a considerable role in supporting gendered stereotypes for both men and women. When media messages portray harmful myths, restrictive roles for women and men, or sexist attitudes it normalizes women as powerless and supports woman abuse. This in turn serves as a model for what is considered acceptable behaviour in society.

### **4. Attitudes and behaviours leading to woman abuse**

Societal attitudes and behaviours that privilege being male over being female still exist. For instance, male sports are better supported and better funded than female sports, the selection of male fetuses over female fetuses still exists as a practice, women's leadership roles are restricted in some faith organizations, family property is sometimes unequally allocated in estate division, e.g. farm being inherited by the male offspring, on reserves Aboriginal men maintain the property rights of the matrimonial home, when a family separates. Values that place more importance on men than women result in societal attitudes that condone woman abuse. These attitudes make it more acceptable to disrespect or harm women because they are viewed as less important and powerful than men.

Each of the factors described above contributes to inequality between women and men in our society and an uneven sharing of power.

## **Q: But women are equal now...aren't they?**

**A:** Even though laws and social policies have changed in an effort to mitigate inequality between women and men, gender stereotyping persists generation after generation because of the messages we give children about how we value women and men. These messages are relayed through song lyrics, advertisements, movies, television, video games, and through the influential words of other adults around them.

Young boys and men often have more opportunities, power and privilege in academics, athletics, employment, the criminal justice system, and their intimate relationships. Some believe they are superior to women on all levels (i.e. intellectually, socially, financially, and parentally) and therefore have the right, or that their role justifies the use of abusive, dominating behaviour to gain and maintain their positions of authority and prestige. Oppression is sustained by the privilege associated with a preferred gender, race, religion, class, sexual orientation, age and physical ability.

In order to end woman abuse, all women must become equal to men and be valued and respected equally in society.

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## Q: Women are just as abusive as men, right?

**A:** While some men do experience violence within an intimate relationship, the vast majority of victims are women.

According to Statistics Canada's 2006 *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile*:

- In 2004, there were nearly 28,000 incidents of spousal violence reported to the police: 84% of victims were female; 16% of victims were male. Women were more likely than men to report being targets of 10 or more violent spousal episodes (pg 11).
- Over a 10 year period, police reports showed males were much more likely than females to be the perpetrators of spousal violence incidents coming to the attention of police and more likely to repeatedly abuse their spouse (pg 13):
  - One time incidents - 86% male vs. 15% female
  - Repeated abuse incidents - 94% male vs. 6% female
  - Chronic abuse incidents - 97% male vs. 3% female
- Women were twice as likely to be injured as a result of spousal violence (pg 21).

Overall, women are more likely to be victims of more severe forms of violence than are men. *The Family Violence in Canada, A Statistical Profile, 2005*, Statistics Canada showed that women and men experienced very different types of spousal violence and that the impact of the violence is more serious for women than men (pg 13). For instance, the data showed that:

- Female victims of spousal violence were more than twice as likely to be injured as male victims.
- Women were three times more likely to fear for their life, and twice as likely to be the targets of more than 10 violent episodes.
- Women were three times more likely to take time off from their everyday activities because of the violence; and
- Women were sexually assaulted in intimate relationships, whereas men were not.
- Women who experienced violence during a relationship stated that the violence increased in severity or frequency after separation, whereas men did not experience this.

These data support the notion that spousal violence against women is often an issue of power and control; when the woman leaves the relationship, the man's control over his partner is threatened and as a result the violence escalates against the woman (pg 16).

The same report showed that for men the most serious violence they experienced was being slapped (34%) and being kicked, bit, hit or hit with something (34%).

A copy of these reports is available online at:  
<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-224-XIE/free.htm> (2005)  
<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/85-224-XIE/2006000.pdf> (2006)

The Domestic Violence Death Review Committee Annual Report to the Chief Coroner, 2005 reported that, of the 100 cases they examined between 2002 to 2005, females were victims in 93% of the cases and males were victims in 7% of these cases. Males perpetrated the violence in 94% of cases, versus 6% for females. They state that "domestic violence fatalities are not gender-neutral events."

## Q: How do women use violence?

**A:** Violence against anyone is unacceptable and should not be condoned whether it is instigated by men or women. An exception is when violence is used to protect one's self, one's children or pets. Furthermore, being with a partner who is dominating and controlling creates trauma for the victim or victims. Abused women may become aggressive and angry in response to the trauma they endure and this is a warning sign (for more signs see "Warning Signs of Abuse).

Research literature and women's advocates generally acknowledge that women's use of violence can be motivated by numerous circumstances including (but not limited to):

- Self-protection and/or protection of loved ones, such as children and pets (the most common reason for the use of violence)
- A reaction to being abused, dominated and controlled where she is not the dominate aggressor,
- The need to get away from the abuser, during separation or during an attack (this can also be a form of self-protection)
- The desire to control and dominate her partner (research shows that this is in five percent of cases<sup>1,2,3</sup>)

*Most Ontarian's feel a personal responsibility for reducing woman abuse...and recognizing it is the first step. Take the warning signs seriously. Visit [www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.on.ca](http://www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.on.ca) for further information or call the Assaulted Women's Helpline at 1-866-863-0511 or in an emergency the police.*

1 Belknap and Melton's "In Brief: Are Heterosexual Men Also Victims of Intimate Partner Abuse?" Washington DC: Applies Research Forum, National Electronic Network on Violence Against Women, National Resource Center on Domestic Violence.  
2 Miller and Meloy's "Women's Use of Force", Violence Against Women, Volume 12, Number 1, January 2006, pp.89-115.  
3 Johnson and Leone's "The Differential Effects of Intimate Terrorism and Situational Couple Violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey." Journal of Family Issues, 26(3), 2005, pp. 322-349.