

END VIOLENCE TOGETHER

For The Dignity Of Every Woman

FACT SHEET

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN RELATIONSHIPS

Violence against women in relationships is not a private or family affair. Relationship violence is a crime and it happens to many women.

DEFINITION

Violence against women in relationships includes:

- physical assault: hitting, punching, choking, etc
- sexual assault: any forced sexual contact
- threats: e.g. threats to harm the woman, her children and pets and/or other family members
- emotional abuse: insults, intimidation, neglect, control, isolation, etc
- financial abuse: e.g. withholding, stealing or controlling money
- murder

The offender may be a boyfriend, husband, or partner. Violence in relationships also includes violence that happens after the couple has separated or divorced. In fact, violence often gets worse when a woman tries to leave.

Most violence in relationships involves male offenders and female victims. Violence also happens in same-sex (gay and lesbian) relationships. In a small minority of cases, the offender is female and the victim male (see statistics below).

Violence in relationships may also be called domestic violence, family violence, battering, spousal abuse or intimate violence.

The Criminal Code of Canada does not include a specific crime of “violence in relationships.” However, offenders are charged using laws against physical assault, sexual assault, threats to harm or kill someone, criminal harassment and murder.

Place Your Agency Information Here

The Justice system in BC is guided by the Violence Against Women in Relationships (VAWIR) policy, the RCMP Violence in Relationship policy and the Crown Counsel's Spouse Assault policy. These policies direct the justice system to emphasize the criminality of violence within relationships and to take the necessary measures to ensure the protection of those victimized who may be at risk.

STATISTICS

Women are about 8 times more likely than men to experience violence in relationships, especially choking, threats with a weapon and sexual assault. In 2004, these types of assaults accounted for 254,000 women in Canada.¹

In British Columbia:

There were 10,273 incidents of spousal assault reported to police in 2005:

- 74% involved a male offender; 16% involved a female offender.²
- Spousal assault accounted for 26% of all assaults reported.³
- Most victims were female between 25 and 35 years of age, and most offenders were male between the ages of 25 and 35.⁴
- More than two-thirds of the accused charged had a prior criminal record for a previous violent offence.⁵

In Canada:

In 2004, approximately 653,000 women in Canada had been physically or sexually assaulted by a spouse at least once during the previous 5 years.⁶

- Of the nearly 28,000 incidents of relationship violence reported to police, 84% involved female victims and 16% involved male victims.⁷
- 1 in 5 homicides in Canada involves the killing of an intimate partner.^{8,3}
- Women make up 98% of spousal violence victims of kidnapping/hostage-taking and sexual assault.⁹
- 21% of women abused by a marital partner were assaulted during pregnancy; 40% of these women stated that the abuse began during their pregnancy.¹⁰
- 12% of young women, aged 18 to 24, reported at least 1 incident of violence by a marital partner in a one-year period – 4 times the national average.¹¹

REPORTING VIOLENCE AND ACCESSING SERVICES

- Police are more likely to become aware of violent incidents when women experience abuse after separation. Incidents of spousal violence in current relationships are brought to the attention of the police in only 22% of cases; assault by a previous partner is reported in 45% of cases.¹²
- In 2000 the percentage of offences cleared by charge was considerably higher for spousal assault incidents (73% cleared by charge) compared to non-spousal assault incidents (23% cleared by charge). This trend has also been apparent during the past 10 years. Overall, this data indicate that the police are recommending charges in cases involving violence in relationships.¹³

- 78% of spousal assault incidents reported to police in BC involve a male offender.¹⁴

47% of women survivors contacted a service for assistance in 2004. 37% of women saw a counsellor, 17% called crisis lines or crisis centres and 14% went to a community or family centre in 2003/04.¹⁵

THE IMPACT OF RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE

Death

- 1 in 5 homicides in Canada involves the killing of an intimate partner.¹⁶
- In Canada approximately 1 to 2 women per week are murdered by a partner or ex-partner.¹⁷

Injury/Permanent Disability

- 45% of women who experienced spousal violence indicated that they had suffered injury, and 43% of these women required medical attention.¹⁸

Psychological and Physical Impact

- Women who were subjected to physical or sexual abuse as children or adults are at greater risk of health problems including: injury, chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, anxiety and clinical depression.¹⁹
- Violence increases the risk of behaviors such as smoking and substance use.¹⁴
- The impact of abuse often persists long after abuse has stopped. Survivors of abuse average more surgeries, physician and pharmacy visits, hospital stays and mental health consultations than other women. This is despite the factoring of other factors affecting health care use, and discounting emergency room visits.²⁰
- Women who have been sexually assaulted and/or battered are more likely than other women to commit suicide.²¹

Decrease in Income

- After separation, women experience a 23% loss in family income. At the same time, men register a gain of 10%.²²

Impact on Children Who Witness Abuse

- Almost 40% of women assaulted by spouses said their children witnessed the violence against them (either directly or indirectly) and in many cases the violence was severe. In half of the cases of violence against women in relationships that were witnessed by children, the woman feared for her life.²³
- There is 30 to 40 percent overlap between children who witness violence in relationships and children who experience direct physical abuse themselves.²⁴
- The immediate and longer term associations between seeing violent behaviour and children's aggression and anxiety depend on the child's

- age and sex, the severity, intensity and chronicity of the violence, the child's perception of his or her role in the violence, and parental responses.²⁵
- Children who had seen violent behaviour were more likely than those who had not to be overtly aggressive. Levels of physical aggression remained high 2 and 4 years later for both sexes, and anxiety was high 2 years later for boys.²⁶

VIOLENCE IN RELATIONSHIPS IN SPECIFIC COMMUNITIES

We have included information here about some groups of women who face additional challenges when they are assaulted and when they seek help.

Aboriginal Women

Aboriginal women often face racism when they try to get help after being assaulted. Aboriginal women may live in urban cities or be isolated in small rural communities, where there are few services and where confidentiality is compromised. Aboriginal women may be reluctant to report violence by Aboriginal men, knowing that Aboriginal men are more likely to be arrested and jailed than non-Aboriginals.

The Ontario Native Women's Association and the 1991 Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba concluded that these findings were especially alarming given that the violence experienced by Aboriginal women is believed to exceed that of any other group of women in Canada:

- For Aboriginal women, violence frequently begins in childhood and continues throughout adolescence into adulthood.²⁷
- Violence in Aboriginal women's lives is pervasive; results of a study conducted by the Ontario Native Women's Association in 1989 revealed that 80% of Aboriginal women experience violence in relationships.²⁸
- Compounded by the violence of systemic and institutionalized racism, as well as the effects of historical violence such as residential schooling, the Indian Act and other legacies of colonization, violence in many Aboriginal women's lives is a daily occurrence.²⁹
- The 1991 Report of the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry of Manitoba also identified the intersection of racism and violence for Aboriginal women: "Aboriginal women and their children suffer tremendously as victims in contemporary society. They are victims of racism, of sexism and of unconscionable levels of domestic and sexual violence. The justice system has done little to protect them from any of these assaults."

Immigrant & Refugee Women

Immigrant and refugee women, and women without official immigration status, may have a number of difficulties in accessing support when they have been victimized. Service providers may blame a woman's culture or race for the violence, stereotyping certain communities as more violent than other Canadians (which is not accurate). There may not be services available in a woman's first language, and she may not speak English well enough to use mainstream services. She may be isolated within a small community, or afraid to bring in outside authority figures such as police.

Women With Disabilities

Depending on her disability, a woman may be more vulnerable to abuse. If the offender is her caregiver, she may be dependant on him for basic needs such as food, medication or communication. She may not be able to tell anyone about the abuse she is experiencing.

- 42% of women with disabilities have been or are in abusive relationships.³⁰
- Of women with disabilities, it is estimated that 83% will be sexually abused in their lifetime.³¹ Of girls with intellectual disabilities, it is estimated that 40% to 70% will be sexually abused before the age of 18.³² Of psychiatric inpatients, 80% have experienced physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime.³³

Women in Same-Sex Relationships

Very few studies have been done to determine the rates of violence in same sex relationships, and those that have been done are often small and present conflicting numbers. Some suggest the rates of violence are similar to those in heterosexual relationships; others say that rates are higher or lower. A woman in a same-sex relationship may experience homophobia when she reports violence. She may not be taken seriously once service providers find out that the offender is a woman. She may be part of a small lesbian community where confidentiality is difficult to maintain, and where the offender is well respected. She may not want to expose her abusive partner to police or others' bias.

Young or Older Women

Women may experience problems based on their age and this is often the situation for:

- Older women who may not wish to disclose to their children.
- Older women who experience difficulty in leaving their home and are unaware of the resources that are available.
- Young women with children who lack the resources to be self-sufficient.
- Young women between 16 and 19 years of age, living with their parents but not attending school. They may fall into the "dependent youth" category for welfare requirements and be subjected to special requirements.
- Young women under 19 years of age, who are not living with their parents, may experience problems when applying for welfare benefits on their own except under certain circumstances.³⁴

Rural Women

Women living in rural communities face additional barriers that include:

- Deliberate relocation decisions of abusive partners to remote or isolated rural areas where neighbours, officials, Community-Based Victim Assistance Programs, the Ministry of Children and Family Development etc are not available.
- Limited RCMP coverage of a huge geographical area and few staff may result in a long time to respond or not respond at all.
- Limited access to public transportation if any.
- Lack of access to public telephones.

- Reduced or eliminated access to justice related services.
- Harsh weather conditions that often result in impossible travel conditions.
- Communities with no advocates, transition houses, women's centres, translation services, safe homes, hospitals, Community-Based Victim Services or transportation means.³⁵

Sex Workers

Sex workers, particularly those who work on the street, face high levels of violence in their work. Many come from groups that are particularly discriminated against: women and girls, Aboriginal people, immigrants and transgendered people. In BC, many sex workers have gone missing or have been murdered, particularly from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and from Highway 16 between Prince Rupert and Prince George (the "Highway of Tears"). Many women and children are trafficked into Canada from other countries to work in the sex trade. Because of their lack of immigration status, they are extremely vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

REASONS WHY MANY WOMEN STAY

One of the most common questions about violence against women in relationships is "Why do women stay?". Most women in abusive relationships do end up leaving. However, this process can be a long and dangerous one. Non-judgmental, well-informed support is essential for assisting women to be as safe as possible, whether or not they leave their abusers. A woman in an abusive relationship probably faces at least one of the following barriers to leaving:

- An abuser is most likely to kill his partner when she leave or tries to leave him.³⁶
- Violence often continues even after a relationship has ended, through ongoing emotional and physical abuse, stalking, or protracted custody and access disputes.³⁷
- The abuser may have threatened to harm her, her children, other family members and/or pets if she leaves. He may have threatened to commit suicide or kidnap her children.
- She may be financially dependent on him. Women's income usually decreases after a relationship ends, and many women face extreme poverty.
- If the woman is Aboriginal and lives on reserve, she may lose her housing and/or community.
- A woman with a disability may depend on her partner for personal care.
- Aboriginal women and women of colour may fear racist responses from service providers if they seek help. Lesbians may fear a homophobic response by the system or service provider.
- Women from small communities may worry having to leave their community if the relationship ends.
- The woman may not speak English.
- The abuser may have told the woman that she won't be able to live without him – that she will never find anyone else, etc. This type of ongoing emotional abuse can be very damaging and a woman may start to believe the abuser.
- The woman may be in love with the abuser, committed to "working things out," and/or committed to raising children with him.

- The woman may believe his promises to change.
- The woman may believe that the abuse is her fault.
- The woman may not know that violence is illegal or that there are resources available.
- The woman may believe that her children will be safer or better cared for if she stays.

In our efforts to end violence against women, we need to be sure not to blame women for the abuse they experience. We need to ask the question, “Why does the abuser continue to abuse?”

RESOURCES

There are approximately 400 programs to assist with violence against women and children in BC. These include:

- Community-Based Victim Assistance Programs
- Stopping the Violence Counselling Programs
- Outreach Programs
- Transition Houses
- Children Who Witness Abuse Programs
- Second Stage Houses
- Safe Homes

To find a program in your community you can call:

VictimLINK (Victim Information and Referrals) is a Multi-lingual line.

- Call toll-free in BC at 1-800-563-0808, 24 hours every day
- If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call Information Service Vancouver’s TTY Service at (604) 875-0885. If calling from outside the Lower Mainland, call collect

CONTACT US

- If you want more information
- If you need help
- If you want to volunteer or make a donation

PLACE YOUR PROGRAM NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION HERE:

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