

# END VIOLENCE TOGETHER

## For The Dignity Of Every Woman

### FACT SHEET

#### SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault is difficult to talk about but it happens to many women. Sexual assault is an act of violence. It is never the victim's fault.

#### DEFINITION

Sexual assault is any forced or coerced sexual contact. While most survivors of sexual assault are women, men also report being sexually assaulted in this way. Most offenders are male. The offender may be a husband, boyfriend, partner, acquaintance, date or stranger. <sup>1</sup>

There are three levels of sexual assault in the Criminal Code of Canada:

**Level 1:** sexual assault: any forced sexual contact without bodily harm

**Level 2:** sexual assault: forced sexual contact causing or threatening to cause bodily harm using a weapon (imitation or real)

**Level 3:** sexual assault: forced sexual contact that causes aggravated bodily harm or endangers the life of the survivor or others <sup>2</sup>

#### STATISTICS

- 40% of women in Canada have been sexually assaulted.<sup>3</sup>
- In BC, 3,794 sexual assaults and other sexual offences were reported to the police in 2005. Almost 90% of these were Level 1 sexual assaults. <sup>4</sup>
- Victimization surveys show that less than 8% of women who are sexually assaulted report the assault to the police.<sup>5</sup>
- In cases reported to police, 80% of sexual assault survivors knew their assailant. Of them, 10% were assaulted by a friend; 41% by an acquaintance; 28% by a family member and 20% by a stranger.<sup>6</sup>
- 90% of sexual assault victims who know their attacker do not report the attack to the police.<sup>7</sup>

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Place Your Agency Information Here

- In 2000, 24,000 sexual assaults were reported to the police in Canada, 3,700 were reported to the police in BC.<sup>8</sup> Extrapolation based on the above noted victimization rate would mean over 400,000 women in Canada and 61,000 women in BC were sexually assaulted in the year 2000.

## **THE IMPACT OF SEXUAL ASSAULT**

The impact of sexual assault often persists long after the assault has stopped. Survivors of sexual assault average more surgeries, physician and pharmacy visits, hospital stays and mental health consultations than other women. This is despite the other factors affecting health care use, and discounting emergency room visits.<sup>9</sup>

Assaults on women with disabilities can trigger severe physical reactions. A woman with epilepsy may have a seizure, a woman with cerebral palsy may develop even more unclear speech, or a woman with diabetes may go into insulin shock.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

According to Statistics Canada, women are physically injured in 11% of sexual assaults.<sup>12</sup>

Violence increases the risk of behaviors such as smoking and substance use.<sup>13</sup>

Women who have been sexually assaulted are more likely than other women to commit suicide.<sup>14</sup>

Over 75% of the women who were killed by their abuser were also raped by him.<sup>15</sup>

### **Common Effects Include:**

#### **1. Shattering of a person's world view<sup>16</sup>**

After experiencing a sexual assault, many women's commonly held belief that the world is fair gets shattered, raising distressing issues such as: "The world isn't really a safe or fair place," "maybe I'm not a good person," "I've been working so hard to follow the rules and it did no good at all – why did I bother?"

#### **2. Loss of Hope**

The experience of sexual assault can seriously undermine a survivor's sense of hope. Active counselling or support and the gradual realization that she is still capable of enjoying positive experiences often assists a survivor to re-build a sense of hope.

### **3. Loss of a Sense of Safety**

This is particularly true if the survivor was sexually assaulted in circumstances which she previously defined as "safe." Working through this issue often leads women to take concrete measures to build a sense of safety again.

### **4. Loss of Trust for Self and Others**

After an experience of sexual assault that involves the betrayal of trust by someone known to her, the survivor's sense of trust in others may be badly shaken. She may also come to mistrust her own ability to make sound judgments about other people.

### **5. Loss of a Sense of Independence**

Sexual assault can affect the survivor's ability to control her own behaviour and to rely solely on her own resources.

### **6. Loss of a Sense of Power**

Sexual assault involves the loss of power (loss of the ability to exert control over one's environment). The experience of sexual assault can either seriously undermine a survivor's sense of personal power or further reinforce one's feelings of helplessness or lack of control.

### **7. Loss of a Sense of Esteem**

The belief in one's own worth or value is often seriously compromised by the experience of being sexual assaulted.

Psychological/Emotional Impact:<sup>17</sup>

- Fear of physical injury, mutilation and/or death
- Anger
- Humiliation
- Shame
- Embarrassment
- Guilt
- Shock
- PTSS (Post-traumatic stress syndrome):
  - Emotional detachment
  - Sleep disturbances
  - Flashbacks
  - Disassociation

Physical Impact:

- Acute physical injuries
- Unwanted pregnancies and miscarriages
- STDs including HIV/AIDS
- Soreness
- Muscle tension leading to headaches, fatigue and sleep disturbances
- Loss of appetite/nausea

## **SEXUAL ASSAULT IN SPECIFIC COMMUNITIES**

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

### **Aboriginal Women**

Aboriginal women often face racism when they try to get help after being sexually assaulted. Aboriginal women may be isolated living in urban areas or 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.<sup>18</sup>
- 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.<sup>19</sup>
- 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.<sup>20</sup>
- 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 assaulted. 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.

- Of women with disabilities, it is estimated that 83% will be sexually abused in their lifetime.<sup>21</sup> Of girls with intellectual disabilities, it is estimated that 40% to 70% will be sexually abused before the age of 18.<sup>22</sup> Of psychiatric inpatients, 80% have experienced physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime.<sup>23</sup>

### **Women Sexually Assaulted by Women**

Very few studies have been done to determine the rates of violence in same sex relationships, including sexual assault, 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 who is sexually assaulted by a woman 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 offender to police or others' bias.

### **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.

## **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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## REFERENCES:

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- 23 "Assault Experiences of 100 Psychiatric Inpatients: Evidence for the Need for Routine Inquiry," Andrea Jacobson and Bonnie Richardson, *American Journal of Psychiatry* 144, 7 (1987): 908. Quoted in *Violence Against Women with Disabilities*, National Clearinghouse on Family Violence, 2004.