

# Myths and Dynamics of Violence Against Women in Relationships



## Social Context of Violence Against Women in Relationships

Abuse of women has been condoned throughout history and in many different parts of the world. Violence against women is a social problem, although it is often characterized as being a personal issue. This can lead to social attitudes that blame women (often referred to as victim-blaming) while finding ways to excuse male violence. For example, women are blamed for "choosing" an abusive partner or for staying in an abusive relationship, while men's responsibility for abuse is minimized by attributing it to anger management problem.

## Myths and Realities of Violence Against Women in Relationships

While women's experiences of abuse are complex and vary across culture, class, ethnicity, age, ability and sexual orientation, there are some common myths and social stereotypes about women and abuse in relationships. Understanding the myths can help us to change our attitudes and beliefs about women and the abuse they are subjected to by intimate partners.

Myths About Abused Women	Reality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each partner is equally responsible for the abuse</li> <li>• Men can't control the abuse</li> <li>• Women are attracted to abusive men</li> <li>• Abusive incidents are random and isolated</li> <li>• Women can be as abusive as their partners</li> <li>• Women can provoke abuse or control abusive partners</li> <li>• Women have deficits</li> <li>• Abuse is measured by severity and frequency of acts of physical violence</li> <li>• Abusive men are behaving in socially acceptable ways</li> <li>• Abused women believe that abusive behaviour is normal</li> <li>• Abused women have low expectations of relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abusive men are 100% responsible for violence against women</li> <li>• Abusive men are in control and make choices about who they abuse and where they are abusive</li> <li>• Abusive men initially conceal the abuse from a new partner</li> <li>• Abuse is patterned and intentional</li> <li>• There is a distinction between motives and intentions - women act to protect themselves and abusive men act to dominate and control their partners</li> <li>• Women are not responsible for the abuse</li> <li>• Women have developed safety and coping strategies</li> <li>• Abuse is measured by the impact - fear, health problems and mental health issues</li> <li>• Standards of parenting and relationship behaviour are lower for men than for women</li> <li>• Women seek support and try to talk about the abuse and it is minimized, dismissed and ignored.</li> <li>• Relationship expectations have been eroded by the abuse</li> </ul>

There are also extremely powerful and harmful myths and stereotypes that contribute to the further social discrimination of and increased violence towards women of colour, aboriginal women, low income women, immigrant and refugee women, young and older women, lesbians/bisexuals and transgendered women, sex trade workers and women with disabilities. These myths are based on ideas of what a 'normal' family is (ie. nuclear family), who a woman is (ie. white, heterosexual, able-bodied, mature) and who is responsible for relationships (ie. woman is the primary caregiver, not extended family). Understanding our biases can help to alleviate the additional burden that women sometimes face when they are requiring social support.

## **Dynamics of Violence Against Women in Relationships**

A key characteristic of woman abuse is that it is patterned and intentional. It is not limited to physical assaults. While we have noted that only certain acts of violence constitute a crime, men use many forms of abuse to create a sense of fear, submission, isolation, exhaustion, humiliation and instability in their partners. This abuse is often, although not always, interspersed with occasional positive behaviours such as making promises to change, being romantic, buying gifts, showing remorse and apologizing. Such contrasting behaviour can leave women feeling confused, hopeless and dependent on her partner, which makes her more vulnerable and unsafe. *Power and control are at the centre of abusive relationships.* The abuser uses tactics to maintain his power and control over the victim. A pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviours, often including physical, sexual and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion are tactics that adults and adolescents use against their intimate partners.

Abusive tactics include but are not limited to:

- verbal abuse: insults, put-downs, degrading language, "silent treatment"
- emotional abuse: threats to take away the children, threats to harm or kill the woman/ her children/relatives/parents/pets, threats of suicide or murder-suicide, threats of deportation, threats of removal from an Aboriginal band, unpredictable behaviour, denying partner an opportunity to sleep
- psychological abuse: undermining self-esteem, undermining the woman's parenting decisions, accusing the woman of unfaithfulness and being excessively suspicious of the woman's actions, keeping weapons/fire-arms in the house, stalking
- controlling financial resources of the family to disempower the woman, spending money on gambling, alcohol or drugs rather than on family expenses, forcing the woman to commit welfare fraud, not paying child support, refusing to allow a woman to work or have her own bank account
- isolating the woman from extended family, friends and social connections in the community (e.g., deciding to move to a community where the woman knows no one, refusing to allow the woman to go out with friends, discouraging or forbidding contact with the woman's family, refusing to allow the woman to attend language or job training, work, medical/health care facilities)
- physical abuse: hitting, slapping, pushing, beating, choking, assault with a weapon, locking the woman out of the house
- threats of physical abuse, including driving recklessly and using weapons to threaten
- sexual abuse: any form of sexual activity that is non-consensual including use of pornography, affairs and extreme jealousy
- using culture to legitimize abuse, refusing to allow the woman to learn Canadian languages and cultures, forcing her to adopt his cultural practices, isolating her from spiritual/religious beliefs and the community
- withholding or forcing the use of medication and/or forcing other inappropriate medical care, withholding care to an older woman or woman with disabilities
- harming or destroying family pets or property

## **Woman Abuse and Social Marginalization**

While violence affects all women regardless of culture, class, ethnicity, age, ability, occupation or sexual orientation, the impact of violence can be compounded by any forms of social marginalization.