



# Wife Abuse

Information from...

## The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

**Over the past fifteen years, Canada has led the world in its attempts to understand and prevent wife abuse. We have come a long way, but there is still so much more to do. We hope this fact sheet will help *you* get involved to prevent violence against women in their homes and in their closest relationships.**

### What Is Wife Abuse?

Wife abuse is an attempt to control the behaviour of a wife, common-law partner or girlfriend. It is a misuse of power which uses the bonds of intimacy, trust and dependency to make the woman unequal, powerless and unsafe. Wife abuse can include some or all of the following:

**Physical abuse** can involve slapping, punching, kicking, biting, shoving, choking, or using a weapon or other object to threaten or injure. It can and sometimes does result in death.

**Psychological abuse** includes excessive jealousy and attempts to control the woman's time, her activities, even how she dresses or wears her hair. Men who are psychologically abusive will try to limit who their wives or partners visit or talk to on the phone, so that the women become isolated from friends and relatives. Psychological abuse can also involve being harassed at work by phone calls or visits, having prized possessions destroyed, being denied sex or affection and enduring suicide threats by a husband, partner or lover. Psychological abuse can include threats to take their children away. If the

woman is an immigrant or refugee, her abuser may threaten to have her deported.

**Verbal abuse** consists of constant criticism, name-calling and “put-downs”. It includes unjust blaming, and false accusations about loyalties or sexual actions. It can include repeated threats of violence against a woman, her children, her friends, her relatives or her pets.

**Sexual abuse** means the woman is forced to perform sexual acts against her will or to suffer pain or injury during sex. Sexual abuse can also include being infected with HIV, or with other sexually transmitted diseases because a husband or partner refuses to use a condom or does not tell the woman about the possibility of infection.

**Financial abuse** means that even if the family is not poor, the woman will have no access to the family’s money, no say over what will be bought, and no money for her own use.

**Spiritual abuse** means that a woman’s spiritual beliefs are made fun of or attacked, or that she is not allowed to attend the church, synagogue or temple of her choice. Sometimes, her children are raised in a different faith or tradition against her will.

*Remember:*

- Physical abuse, sexual abuse and threats of violence are all *illegal* under the terms of Canada’s Criminal Code.
- Wife abuse is seldom a one-time occurrence. It usually takes place within a cycle of violent or abusive actions, followed by a “honeymoon phase”, then a time when tensions increase again until another explosion takes place and the cycle repeats itself. With each cycle, the level of violence increases.
- Attitudes that accept inequality and that accept or even glorify violence, especially against people who are seen as “deserving” victims, are more common in our society than we sometimes want to admit. Abuse of a woman by her husband or lover is just one example of violence in relationships where one person is seen as less worthy than another. Lesbian partners may also be abused by their lovers in relationships where one partner is dominant.
- Women with disabilities may also experience the same types of abuse at the hands of people who provide their physical care.
- Some women report that they are abused not only by their husbands or partners, but also by their in-laws, their children or other family members.
- Abused women are almost always isolated by their husbands or partners. They are cut off from friends and family, and discouraged

from forming friendships at work, at their place of worship or in the neighbourhood. Often the first step toward providing support is to help break down this isolation.<sup>1</sup>

### **How Widespread Is Wife Abuse?**

- According to Statistics Canada's 1993 National Survey on Violence Against Women, three in ten women currently or previously married, or living in a common-law relationship in Canada have experienced at least one incident of **physical or sexual violence** – violence that is against the law – at the hands of their current partner or a former husband or common-law partner.<sup>2</sup>
- More than 200 000 women have been physically or sexually abused by their husbands or common-law partners in the past year.<sup>3</sup>
- One third of women who were assaulted by a partner feared for their lives at some point during the abusive relationship.<sup>4</sup>
- Over the period 1974-1992, a married woman was nine times as likely to be killed by her spouse as by a stranger.<sup>5</sup>
- While men too can be abused by a partner, research has consistently shown that the man is the victim of abuse in fewer than 10 percent of all incidents of partner abuse.

### **But Aren't Some Women More at Risk of Abuse than Others?**

Wife abuse can and does happen to rich as well as poor women, to old as well as young women, to women who work outside the home as well as women who work within the home without pay, to women of all races, to women with disabilities, to those who do not have physical or mental disabilities, and to lesbian as well as heterosexual women. Wife abuse cuts across religions, political affiliations and geography.

**There are some factors that increase the risk of wife abuse, particularly the risk of serious abuse where the woman is beaten, choked, sexually assaulted or assaulted with a weapon, or where the woman receives medical attention for injuries.**

- The highest rates of wife assault are found among **young** women and men, (18-24 years) and among marital or common-law partnerships of **fewer than two years**.<sup>6</sup> Teenaged wives are at the greatest risk of being killed by their husbands.<sup>7</sup>
- Men who had witnessed their fathers' violence toward their mothers inflicted more severe and repeated violence on their own wives than men whose fathers were not violent.
- **Alcohol** is a prominent but *not* a causal factor in wife abuse. In just over half of all violent incidents, the violent partner was drinking.<sup>9</sup> The

abuser was most likely to have been drinking when the woman suffered more serious abuse.<sup>10</sup>

- Women are at greater risk of severe violence or even of being murdered **just after they leave** their husbands or partners. A large majority of murders occur when a woman attempts to leave the relationship in order to escape her partner's attempts to control her.<sup>11</sup>
- The risk of being killed by a spouse or partner is eight times higher for women in **common-law** relationships than in registered marriages.<sup>12</sup>

*Remember:*

All forms of abuse are attempts to control. Most men who physically abuse their partners also use controlling psychological and verbal abuse to keep them isolated and feeling worthless so that the women find it difficult to look for help and support. The National Survey on Violence Against Women found that almost all men who inflicted very serious violence against their wives were also psychologically abusive.

### **Do We Know What Causes This Form of Violence?**

- Over the years we have learned that there is no cause of wife abuse that can simply be eliminated to stop the violence. Wife abuse is a result of attitudes, values, jobs, economic and political realities that give the message that women are not “worth” as much as men.

- Researchers have found that people who believe they have the right to control their partner's actions (e.g. to decide whether or not wives should work outside the home or go out in the evening with friends) are more likely to be abusive.<sup>13</sup>
- Research also shows that when a man's friends believe that he should be “the boss” and approve of slapping a woman to “keep her in line”, he is much more likely to physically abuse during the marriage.<sup>14</sup>
- For women who are also members of racial, cultural or language minorities, women who have a disability, lesbians or elderly women, all of whom experience added discrimination, attitudes and values that portray women as unequal or as deserving abuse “to keep them in line” magnify the inequalities they live with each day. To stop the violence, we must all work to change attitudes, values and structures that condone and even encourage inequality and the abuse of power.

### **What Are the “Costs” of Wife Abuse?**

- Wife abuse is *not* just a personal problem. It affects all of us. It reflects and grows from attitudes, values and economic realities that show disrespect for women and that see women as less important than men.

*“Costs” for the Abused Women:*

- Almost half (45%) of wife assault cases result in physical injury to the woman. The most frequent types of injuries are bruises (90%), cuts, scratches and burns (33%), broken bones (12%) and fractures (11%).<sup>15</sup>
- Close to 10 percent of injured women have also suffered internal injuries and miscarriages.<sup>16</sup>
- In many cases the woman is injured badly enough to require medical attention. According to the National Survey on Violence Against Women, four in ten women (that’s over half a million women) injured by a partner saw a doctor or nurse for medical attention.<sup>17</sup>
- Women also suffer psychologically. A significant number report being depressed or anxious, fearful, less trusting, having lowered self-esteem, and having problems relating to men.<sup>18</sup>
- A quarter of the women who have lived with violence say they have turned to alcohol, drugs or medication to help them cope with the situation.<sup>19</sup>
- In almost a third of the cases involving physical or sexual abuse, the woman had to take time off from work and other activities.<sup>20</sup>
- Some women suffer from abuse all their lives. We now know that elder abuse is often wife abuse “grown old”.

- **And we can’t forget that women are dying from abuse. Some women are murdered. Some die as a result of their injuries. Some die or will die of AIDS.**

*“Costs” for Our Children:*

- Children who witness violence are more likely to be in violent relationships when they become adults. According to Statistics Canada’s National Survey on Violence Against Women, children witnessed violence against their mothers in almost 40 percent of violent marriages or common-law relationships. In more than half of these cases, children witnessed very serious forms of violence, where women were injured and often feared for their lives.<sup>21</sup>
- There is some evidence that in homes where the woman is abused, children are at greater risk of also being direct victims of physical and sexual abuse.<sup>22</sup>
- Some children in abusive homes may suffer emotional abuse or neglect because their parents can’t supply the energy, calm and sensitivity that children need.
- Children who grow up in violent homes may learn to use violence to solve problems.<sup>23</sup>
- Children can also lose one or both parents through violence. Their parents may be killed, permanently disabled, or permanently removed from the home by a child welfare agency.

*“Costs” for the Abusive Partner:*

- Abuse can result in a criminal record and the subsequent loss of a job or difficulty in getting a job after conviction.
- Many abusive men suffer from low self-esteem, frustration and guilt.<sup>24</sup>

*“Costs” for All of Us:*

- Because we tolerate violence against women in our society, we pay dearly. Health costs for injuries and chronic health problems caused by abuse amount to about a billion dollars every year.<sup>25</sup>
- Abused women are more prone to accidents and reduced concentration and productivity at work.
- We also pay a social cost in the form of children too traumatized to learn or develop normally, adult victims unable to function to their full potential, and diminished quality of family and community life.<sup>26</sup>

## **What Can We Do?**

If we really want to prevent wife abuse, we must *all* play a part. Here’s what you can do to make a difference.

1. *Learn more about what your community is doing about wife abuse.*

Your phone book may be an easy place to start. Telephone numbers for emergency shelters, sexual assault

centres and distress lines are listed at the front of telephone directories in most cities and towns across Canada.<sup>27</sup>

2. *Ask yourself if someone close to you is abused.*

We learned, through the National Survey on Violence Against Women, that abused women still rely most heavily on friends, neighbours and family for support and help. But we also learned that many women (almost one quarter of those who suffer abuse) never tell anyone about the violence.<sup>28</sup>

If you suspect or know that someone close to you is being abused:

- be there to listen, to believe her, to let her know she is not alone;
- support her feelings without judging;
- give her time to make her own decisions; help out with the day-to-day demands of life;
- find out about services she can use and share this information;
- help her discover the good things about herself and about her children;
- respect her confidentiality;
- talk with her about what she can do to plan for her own and her children’s safety.

3. Help organize awareness sessions through your church, mosque or synagogue, through your place of work,

or perhaps through an association or club you belong to. The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (see p. 8) can provide you with pamphlets and ideas for organizing these sessions.

4. As a parent, you can *teach children to value the contributions, rights and responsibilities of all individuals*, regardless of gender, age, race, culture or ability.

**5. Ask yourself if you are being abused. Start with the following questions.**

- Does your partner continually criticize what you wear, what you say, how you act and how you look?
- Does your partner often call you insulting and degrading names?
- Do you feel like you need to ask permission to go out and see your friends and family?
- Do you feel that no matter what you do, everything is always your fault?
- Do you feel like you're always walking on eggshells trying to avoid an argument?
- When you're late getting home, does your partner harass you about where you were and who you were with?
- Is your partner so jealous that you're always being accused of having affairs?

- Has your partner threatened to hurt you or the children if you leave?
- Does your partner force you to have sex?
- Has your partner threatened to hit you?
- Has your partner ever pushed, shoved or slapped you?<sup>29</sup>

If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, you may be abused and you may want to refer to the following support services.

**Where to Go for Support Services**  
(Telephone numbers can be found at the front of your phone book)

- Transition house or shelter
- Police department
- Distress centre
- Sexual assault centre
- Social service agency

**Do You Want to Learn More?**

The National Clearinghouse on Family Violence can provide you with a list of publications that can be ordered free of charge. The Clearinghouse can also tell you about films and videos on wife abuse that can be borrowed through the National Film Board's regional offices.

## **Examples of Publications Available from the Clearinghouse:**

***Transition Houses and Shelters for Battered Women in Canada*** lists over 300 shelters, second-stage houses and transition houses. Telephone numbers are included.

There are more than 100 Canadian treatment programs for men who abuse women. ***Canada's Treatment Programs for Men Who Abuse Their Partners*** gives a brief description and contacts.

***Wife Abuse: A Workplace Issue – A Guide for Change*** is a manual for the workplace that contains ideas to raise awareness of wife abuse.

Recognizing and learning from the unique needs and experiences of Aboriginal women and women from other minority cultural groups is essential in a country as diverse as Canada. The Clearinghouse has several publications that communicate the voices and wisdom of women from cultural minorities.

## **Examples of Resources Available Elsewhere**

***Taking Action: A Union Guide to Ending Violence Against Women*** is available from the Women's Research Centre, 101-2245 West Broadway, Vancouver, B.C., V6K 2E4.

The Canadian Teachers' Federation has produced ***Thumbs Down!*** to educate students from junior kindergarten to grade 12 about wife abuse, and about the attitudes from which it grows. Available from the Canadian Teachers' Federation, 110 Argyle Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, K2P 1B4.

Spiritual healing is for many women a central part of surviving violence and moving beyond a life that includes abuse. The Church Council on Justice and Corrections has produced two kits that build on the spiritual richness of individuals and groups to nourish understanding about abuse and its prevention and help strengthen relationships and communities. These kits can be purchased by calling 1-613-563-1688 or by writing to: The Church Council on Justice and Corrections, 507 Bank Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K2P 1Z5.

## **Endnotes**

1. Denham, Donna and Joan Gillespie. *Wife Abuse: A Workplace Issue: A Guide for Change*. 1991. Available from the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence.
2. Rodgers, Karen. "Wife Assault: The Findings of a National Survey." *Juristat*. Cat. 85-002, Vol. 14, Number 9. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. Statistics Canada. March 1994. Ottawa, Ontario.
3. *ibid.*



4. p. 8, op. cit.
5. Wilson, Margo and Martin Daly. "Spousal Homicide." p. 1. *Juristat*. Vol. 14, Number 8. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. Statistics Canada. March 1994. Ottawa, Ontario.
6. Rodgers, Karen. "Wife Assault: The Findings of a National Survey."
7. Wilson, Margo and Martin Daly. "Spousal Homicide," p. 2. op. cit.
8. *ibid*.
9. Rodgers, Karen. "Wife Assault: The Findings of a National Survey." p. 7. op. cit.
10. Johnson, Holly. "Risk Factors Associated with Non-Lethal Violence Against Women by Marital Partners."
11. Wilson, Margo and Martin Daly. "Spousal Homicide," pp. 1 and 6. *Juristat*. Vol. 14, Number 8. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. Statistics Canada. March 1994. Ottawa, Ontario. See also Johnson, Holly, "Risk Factors," p. 4. op. cit.
12. Wilson, Margo and Martin Daly, *ibid*. and Johnson, Holly. "Risk Factors Associated with Non-Lethal Violence Against Women by Marital Partners." Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. Paper presented at the Homicide Research Working Group Annual Conference, June 12-15, 1994, Atlanta, Georgia.
13. DeKeseredy, Walter S. and Katherine Kelly. "Woman Abuse in University and College Dating Relationships: The Contribution of the Ideology of Familial Patriarchy" pp. 33 and 45. *The Journal of Human Justice*, Vol. 4, Number 2. Spring 1993.
14. Smith, Michael. "Male Peer Support of Wife Abuse: An Exploratory Study." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. December 1991.
15. Rodgers, Karen. "Wife Assault: The Findings of a National Survey" p. 8. op.cit.
16. p. 8, *ibid*.
17. p. 9, *ibid*.
18. p. 10, *ibid*.
19. p. 11, *ibid*.
20. p. 9, Rodgers, Karen, op. cit.
21. *ibid*.
22. MacLeod, Linda. *Battered But Not Beaten*, p. 32. Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. 1987. Ottawa, Ontario.
23. p. 33, op. cit.
24. p. 34, op. cit.
25. Day, Tannis. *Costs of Violence Against Women*. Preliminary Results for Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women. 1994. Ottawa, Ontario.

26. Alberta Social Services and Community Health, Office for the Prevention of Family Violence. *Alberta's Special Report on Family Violence: Ideas for Action*. p. 3. 1985. Edmonton, Alberta.
27. Most Canadian telephone companies publish emergency numbers (including services for abused women) at the front of their telephone books.
28. Rodgers, Karen. "Wife Assault: The Findings of a National Survey." op. cit.
29. Prieur, Deborah and Mary Rowles. *Taking Action: A Union Guide to Ending Violence Against Women*, p. 14. B.C. Federation of Labour and the Women's Research Centre. 1992.

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