

3.1 Issues for Various Populations

Women from all backgrounds and circumstances experience abuse. However, there are unique issues and indicators of abuse for different groups of women who experience abuse.

First, it is important to understand that woman abuse in these communities often take place against the back-drop of social and economic marginalization. For Aboriginal women and women from diverse ethnic and racial groups, their experience is situated within the context of racial, sexual and economic oppression. For lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (LBT) women, their experiences are situated within the context of a homophobic society. For immigrant women, the back-drop sometimes includes major social upheaval and the strains of immigration and acculturation. Immigrant women may also fear deportation if their relationship breaks down.

The unique features of these populations are often used against them, including threats based on immigration status, threats of telling others about the woman's sexual orientation or gender identity, using minority status and language competency against women, threats against extended family, and pressure to accept abuse and not seek help outside of the community.

To ensure the response to abused women is appropriate, the diversity of women in York Region should be understood and taken into account in policy and program development and service delivery. While all women share common experiences, the unique issues of the various groups must also be acknowledged.

This section highlights some of the issues that specific populations face, and some of the additional indicators of abuse for these populations.

WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Women with intellectual and learning disabilities

Women with intellectual and learning disabilities can be very vulnerable to abuse because they often have limited life experience, sometimes live isolated and restricted lives, and are likely to be dependent on others.

Limited literacy skills, difficulty with comprehension and understanding of certain concepts and difficulty recalling events can often significantly affect their ability to access the criminal justice system.

Women with mental health issues

Psychiatrized women or women with mental health issues may experience issues similar to disabled or elderly women, as they are not often able to access appropriate supports and services. Psychiatrized women include those who have a DSM IV diagnosis (see the Glossary of Terms, Appendix D) and may be or have been involved in the mental health system. Psychiatrized women are further marginalized when the mental health system accepts and believes the abusive partner's forms of manipulation of this system.

No woman should be refused service and/or not believed when she reports abuse, based on her ability or mental health status.

Women with physical disabilities

Women with physical disabilities are vulnerable to abuse because they are more dependent on a larger number of people for their care, and are less able to get away from their abuser. She may fear that she will not be believed if she does report abuse because people with disabilities are viewed negatively in society.

For women with disabilities, there may be additional indicators of abuse, including:

- The abuser limits the woman's ability by denying her access to proper medical attention, resources, and medical aids to support independent functioning;
- The woman may display exaggerated physical symptoms (more severe than those typically observed in her daily living with her disability) that may have been triggered by the abuse;
- The woman may be unable to report abuse because of her disability, therefore it becomes important to communicate in other ways, e.g. drawings;



FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:

Violence Against Women with Disabilities

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/pdfs/2005femdisabl_e.pdf

Tips for Women's Service Providers Working with Women with Disabilities
<http://www.womanabuseprevention.com/Distips.pdf>

OLDER WOMEN

Like some other groups of women, the potential isolation and dependence on others can contribute to the vulnerability of older women to violence. The fear of losing a home and financial security, the loss of important family relationships may create barriers to leaving violent relationships. The older woman who is abused may also be reluctant to report her family member as the abuser, or she may be unaware of her rights.

Older women may be bound by traditional and cultural values that prevent them from leaving an abusive spouse or from seeing themselves as a victim. They are very often dependent on their spouse and may not have access to the financial resources they need to leave an abusive relationship. In addition, they may be isolated from their family, friends and community, particularly if they suffer from a chronic illness and are dependent on their spouse or caregivers.

Research shows that elder abuse is on the rise. However, it is highly under-reported. Abuse may be hard to detect as some symptoms of the abuse can be minimized or go undetected because they may be similar to the symptoms related to age.

Additional indicators of abuse for older women include:

- Recurrence of the same unexplained injuries;
- Report of repeated falls;
- Misuse of medications (over or under use);
- Medical problems that have gone untreated;
- Signs of malnutrition or dehydration;
- No eye glasses or dentures when there is obvious need for these medical aids;
- Signs of fear or depression;
- Lack of social supports.



FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:

Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nctv-cnivf/familyviolence/pdfs/abuseneg98en.pdf>

Abuse and Neglect of Older Adults: Community Awareness and Response

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/nctv-cnivf/familyviolence/pdfs/agecommuni_e.pdf

WOMEN FROM CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

Women from various immigrant, cultural and linguistic communities may need additional support to access services in the community.

They may not speak English and consequently they may have difficulty communicating their needs and may experience difficulty in finding appropriate resources.

Many social service agencies have staff who speak a number of languages. The agencies listed in Chapter 4 have identified the languages spoken by staff and have identified the availability of interpreter services. Where an interpreter is needed, the agencies can apply to Multilingual Community Interpreting Services for services. After an application and approval, free interpretation services to victims of abuse are available in York Region through service providers. See Multilingual Community Interpreting Services in Chapter 4 – Agency Profiles.

Immigrant and refugee women may also be hesitant to disclose abuse because their partners have told them that disclosing would put their immigration status at risk or may cause them to be deported. These women may have limited knowledge of Canada's legal systems and its responses to violence against women.

These women may face other issues which could contribute to their experiences of violence and decrease the likelihood of escaping from violent relationships. These include post migration issues such as isolation, lack of support, language issues and unemployment.

Additional indicators of abuse include:

- Fear of being shunned by their community or family;
- Social isolation because their partner controls their daily or social activities;
- Restricted from establishing or maintaining relationships with family and/or friends;
- Women may be unaware that woman abuse is a crime in Canada and that laws exist to protect them;
- She may fear or be distrustful of police;
- Family may be used as a coercive tool and there may be threats that financial support of her family may be stopped;
- Women may be unaware of the community resources and services available to them.



FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:

Abuse is Wrong in Any Language
http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/fm/pub/abuse_is_wrong/abuse.html

Isolated, Afraid and Forgotten: The Service Delivery Needs and Realities of Immigrant and Refugee Women Who are Battered
www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/pdfs/isolatedafraid.pdf

Assisting Immigrant and Refugee Women Abused by their Sponsors
http://www.bcifv.org/pubs/Assisting_Immigrant_Women.pdf

PREGNANT WOMEN

Pregnant women are not immune to abuse. In fact, pregnancy is a particularly vulnerable time for women in terms of violence. Research shows that there is a higher incidence of abuse among pregnant women, with even greater risk to pregnant or parenting teens. It is not uncommon for abuse to start or to increase during pregnancy, with adverse effects on the mother and fetus.

Additional indicators of abuse include:

Pre-natally

- Several missed appointments
- Feigned labour to avoid being at home
- Premature contractions
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Threatened abortion
- Miscarriages
- Seeking late prenatal care (e.g. second or third trimester)
- Fear of partner
- Direct trauma to uterus
- Unhappy about the pregnancy

During labour and hospital stay

- Her partner will try to make decisions about how to deal with the pain she is experiencing
- Her partner may present as controlling, display inappropriate behaviour, or smell of alcohol
- After her visits with her partner, the woman seems visibly distressed
- Her partner is absent from the labour room or does not leave the woman alone during extended labour, i.e. will not leave the labour room for meals or a break

Post-natally

- The child may have low birth weight
- The woman may be hesitant to leave the hospital
- The woman may miss appointments
- The woman may not return for post-natal clinic visits
- Her partner calls to cancel post-natal visits



FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:

A Handbook for Health and Social Service Professionals Responding to Abuse
During Pregnancy
www.phac-aspc.qc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/pdfs/pregnancy_e.pdf

WOMEN IN RURAL AND REMOTE AREAS

Women in rural and remote areas face particular issues in relation to violence. Geographical isolation and limited services can mean that women have difficulty accessing support and assistance. They face lack of resources, isolation, small town politics, few support services and poor or little transportation and communication systems. Patriarchal networks, deep-rooted cultural and religious traditions and commonly accepted stereotypes can lead many to blame the woman for the abuse.

Where the abuser has a close relationship with the professionals in the town, is well known, or has a high social standing in the community, those in the community may disbelieve the woman.



FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:

Family Violence in Rural, Farm and Remote Canada
<http://www.acjnet.org/docs/famvidoj.html>

YOUNG WOMEN

Young women also face high risk for experiencing violence. Violence against them can lead to homelessness, pregnancy, long-term emotional effects and can be a key factor in the development of eating disorders, drug and alcohol dependencies.

The social, cultural, religious and family messages they receive about intimacy and relationships can be confusing, misleading or even unhealthy. Many teens can therefore find themselves unsure of what to expect and how to behave in dating or intimate relationships. Fear, misconceptions, lack of services, low self-esteem, control by the abuser, peer pressure and concern about family response all combine to keep abused young women trapped in silence and secrecy.



FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:

Education Wife Assault
Newsletter on Young Woman Abuse
http://www.womanabuseprevention.com/html/Newsletter_Main_2005.htm

LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND TWO-SPIRITED WOMEN IN SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS

As in other relationships, violence and abuse occurs in same sex relationships. And like other abusive relationships, the issue is about maintaining power and control.

LBT women can face particular difficulties in accessing assistance. The history of criminalization of same sex relationships makes LBT victims reluctant to access protection through an institution known to have persecuted and stigmatized them.

While they may face physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or the threat of violence, they may fear additional threats such as outing. Outing is the revealing or threat of revealing one's sexual orientation or gender identity to friends, family, co-workers, landlords, etc. The use of outing, heterosexism and phobias plays on the awareness of societal biases to convince victims of the very real possibility that they will not receive help from legal, social or medical providers. Abusers use these added threats to exert greater control, lower self-esteem and instill fear. They may exploit the potential for discrimination and convince their partners that going outside of the relationship will result in abuse and injury by neighbors, family, police, medical providers and others.



FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE:

Abuse in Lesbian Relationships: Information and Resources
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ncfv-cnivf/familyviolence/pdfs/lesbianabuse.pdf>

Education Wife Assault
Abuse in Same Sex-Relationships
http://www.womanabuseprevention.com/html/same-sex_partner_abuse.html

ABORIGINAL WOMEN¹

Many studies have found that family violence within Aboriginal communities is not merely a problem affecting certain Aboriginal families within otherwise healthy or “normal” communities. These studies have found that, to a large extent, domestic violence and abuse have become a part of the way of life within many communities.

The *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples* (1996) a number of factors linked to violence in Aboriginal communities were identified, including: systemic discrimination; economic and social deprivation; racism; overcrowded and substandard housing; alcohol and substance abuse; and the intergenerational cycle of violence.

In the past, abusive behaviours were moderated by traditional cultural values that were the foundation to all Aboriginal societies across North America. These values, including acceptance, protection, support and nurturing within the community, have been lost due to European settlement and the historical experience of Aboriginal peoples.

¹ *Aboriginal Domestic Violence in Canada*. Aboriginal Healing Foundation. 2003.

When addressing Aboriginal woman abuse, it should be understood that it is:

- a multi-factoral social syndrome, and not simply undesirable behaviour;
- supported by community and societal dynamics;
- rooted in intergenerational abuse;
- likely linked to the need for healing from past trauma; and
- has its roots in Aboriginal historical experience, which must be adequately understood.



OTHER RESOURCES

Supporting Woman Abuse Survivors as Mothers: A Resource to Support Parenting
<http://www.lfcc.on.ca/mothers.html>