

# Chapter 1

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## *An Introduction to the Issue of Woman Abuse*

## 1.1 Defining Woman Abuse<sup>1</sup>

### Why focus on violence against women?

Woman abuse is a serious and widespread social problem. While domestic violence can happen to either men or women, with either men or women as the abuser, this protocol focuses on sexual, domestic and family violence in which women are the victims – referred to as woman abuse. This reflects the prevalence of this type of abuse in society – most domestic violence involves male anger directed against their female partners.

Taking a generic approach to domestic violence, without regard for the gender of the victim, may contribute to the development of general programs that address violence, but these programs may fail to adequately address the needs of women. A gender-based analysis of the issue of domestic violence allows organizations to identify and address the specific needs of women.

A further analysis, for example by race, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or ability, allows for the understanding of the needs of different groups of women.

### Defining women abuse

The United Nations' 1993 *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women*, which was signed by Canada, provides a broad definition of woman abuse, which has been accepted by the international community:

*any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.*

Using this definition as a point of departure, woman abuse is defined here as including but not restricted to the following forms, by someone with whom the woman has or has had an intimate, familial or romantic relationship:

- Physical abuse;
- Psychological and emotional abuse;
- Stalking and harassment;
- Forced social isolation;
- Rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence;
- Financial abuse;
- Spiritual abuse;
- Intimidation and threats; and/or
- Threats of such abuse directed at a woman by a person known to her in an attempt to control her.

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<sup>1</sup> Information is drawn from the following:

**Woman Abuse.** National Clearinghouse on Family Violence. Health Canada. October 2001 (Revised).  
**The Region of Peel Woman Abuse Protocol: Best Practice Guidelines.** Peel Committee Against Woman Abuse. June 2005.

Within this definition, control refers to an attempt on the abuser's part to force a woman to comply with anything against her wishes.

Woman abuse occurs regardless of socio-economic status, age, sexual orientation, occupation, mental health status, citizenship status, ability, spiritual practices, language, race, culture or ethnicity.

Abuse may involve repeated episodes with increasing severity. It may also be a one-time occurrence causing physical or emotional injury that is detrimental to the woman's well-being or that of her family. It is also recognized that while violence against women is perpetrated primarily by men, in our society women can also be perpetrators of violence against women. This protocol acknowledges that a perpetrator of woman abuse may be male or female.

An abused woman is any woman aged 16 and over. Females under the age of 16 are children and should be dealt with in accordance with the *Child Protection and Assault Protocol 2001*, published by the Child Abuse Systems Team (CAST).

## Types of women abuse

Specific types of woman abuse includes the following:

**Physical abuse** includes bodily harm, discomfort or injury caused by hitting, punching, kicking, slapping, pushing, burning, biting, spitting, dragging, pulling, using weapons and objects, restraining, confining, stalking and/or the withholding of food and/or medical attention.

**Psychological and emotional abuse** is any act that provokes fear, diminishes the woman's dignity or sense of self-worth, and/or intentionally inflicts psychological trauma as a means of exerting power and control over the woman. These may include, but are not limited to, on-going criticism, intimidation, humiliation, overly sarcastic comments, passive/aggressive control, harassment, threats to harm self or others, threats to harm pets, threats associated with immigration status, threats to take children away, inappropriate expressions of jealousy, brainwashing, dominance, degradation, possessiveness, control over daily activities, social isolation, purposeful destruction of property and use of privilege in society to threaten or coerce.

**Stalking and harassment** includes behaviour which, in some cases, are against the law and known as "criminal harassment." One of the key elements, which turn stalking behaviour into a crime, is the woman's fear for her own safety or the safety of others. Stalking and harassment can take many different forms but usually is a pattern formed by repeated actions, or a series of different incidents. Each small incident may not seem important, but all the incidents together constitute a pattern. There is no complete list of stalking behaviour as these behaviours are added to from experience. (Contact METRAC for further information. See Chapter 4 for contact information.)

**Sexual abuse** includes any unwanted or forced sexual activity, including touching and intercourse. It also includes the possibility of exposure to sexual transmitted diseases and/or pregnancy by denying the use of protection during intercourse, and forced exposure to or participation in pornography or prostitution. It also includes withholding sex and demeaning women sexually through jokes, and sexual accusations.

**Financial abuse** includes controlling or restricting money to buy necessities such as medicine, medical supplies, food and clothing. It also includes withholding information about household financial matters, denying access to bank accounts and coercion to sign financial documents. Financial abuse can also include denying the right to seek and/or maintain employment, taking personal money, denying independent access to money, and/or excluding the woman from financial decision-making.

**Spiritual abuse** includes degrading the woman's spiritual beliefs, withholding the means to practice, and/or forcing adherence to a particular belief system.

## 1.2 Incidence, Prevalence and Severity

Violence against women is a prevalent and well-documented social problem in Canada.

This data and the findings of various research studies assist us in understanding the prevalence and trends in violence against women in Canada:

- 7% of women (or 653,000 women) who were living in a common-law or marital relationship reported to Statistics Canada's 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) that they had been physically or sexually assaulted by their spousal partner during the previous five years. This represents a small drop from 8% in 1999. (Statistics Canada, 2005)
- Women are more at risk of violence from a man they know than from a stranger. According to the Canadian Crime Statistics, 2000 report by Statistics Canada, male against female violence was the most common type of overall violence but the least likely to involve a stranger. In 77% of reported cases, the women knew their assailant. In 29% of the reported cases, the woman was assaulted by her spouse/ex-spouse. (Statistics Canada, 2000)
- A comparison of the GSS data over several years indicates a decline in the in the percentage of women subjected to the most severe physical assaults by their partners, including being beaten, choked, threatened with a gun or knife, or sexually assaulted, from 50% of all victims in 1993 to 39% in 2004. (Statistics Canada, 2006)
- According to the Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS), 29% of ever married women have been assaulted by their partners at least once. (Statistics Canada 1993, p 4)
- However, the apparent decline in prevalence and severity is not reflected in the use of shelters for abused women. The demand for shelters continues to exceed availability. On average, 200 women are turned away from shelters across the country each day. (Statistics Canada, 2006)
- Only 36% of woman abuse victims in 2004 had reported the spousal violence to police. (Statistics Canada, 2005)
- Current and former husbands make up the largest proportion of abusers recorded by the police. The number in this group has been declining since 2001, while the number of current and former boyfriends has been on the increase. (Statistics Canada, 2006)

- One in five homicides in Canada involves the killing of an intimate partner. In 41% of the killing of men, where there was sufficient information, the police determined that the woman was acting in self-defence. This was the case in only 5% of the spousal killing of women. (Johnson and Hotton, 2003)
- In the majority of spousal homicides, there is a history of abuse in the relationship. Between 1991 and 2004, there was a history of woman abuse in 59% of homicides in which women were killed by their male partners. (Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Social Justice Statistics, Homicide Survey)
- In 1996, in 56% of all spousal homicides, investigating officers had knowledge of previous domestic violence between victims and suspects. (Bunge and Levett 1998, p 32)
- Between 1979 and 1998, 1,468 women were killed by their husbands. (Statistics Canada, 2000)
- Thirty-five percent of all women interviewed in the Violence Against Women Survey who had ever been married or lived with a man in a common-law relationship had been subjected to some form of emotional abuse. This can include: verbal attacks, ridicule, isolation from family and friends, jealousy and unwarranted accusations about infidelity, possessiveness, damage to or destruction of property, torture or killing of pets, and threats to harm children or other family members. (Bunge and Levett 1998, p 15)
- In a Canada-wide snapshot taken on May 31, 1995, there were 2,361 women accompanied by 2,217 children living in shelters across the country. Four out of five women were there to escape an abusive situation, the majority from abuse by a current partner (64%) or ex-partner (21%). (Bunge and Levett 1998, p 18)
- In the twelve months prior to this snapshot 365 shelters across Canada recorded over 85,000 admissions. On a typical day, they receive approximately 3,000 requests from non-residents. (Bunge and Levett 1998, p 19)
- Rates of spousal violence were highest among certain segments of the population: those aged 15 to 24; those in relationships of three years or less; those who had separated; and those in common-law unions. (Statistics Canada, 2005)
- Rates of violence continue to be highest among young women. Women who are between 15 and 19 years of age are twice as likely as older women to be killed in a violent marriage. (Wilson and Daly 1994, p 10)
- Twelve percent of Canadian women aged 18-24 reported at least one incident of violence by an intimate partner in a one-year period, compared with the national average of 3% of all married or cohabiting women. (Bunge and Levett 1998, p 14)
- In 2004, half of the women who reported abused by a past partner indicated that the violence occurred after the couple separated. In one-third of these cases, the violence became more severe or began after the separation. (Statistics Canada, 2006)

- In half of the all ex-partner homicides against women between 1991 and 1999, the woman was killed within two months of leaving the relationship. (Hotton, 2001)
- Forty-two percent of women with disabilities have been or are in abusive relationships. (DisAbled Women's Network 1989)
- Data suggest that Aboriginal people are three times more likely to be victims of spousal violence. Overall, 21% of Aboriginal women said that they had suffered violence in 2004. This was the case for 7% of non-Aboriginal women. Aboriginal women were also more likely to report the most severe and life-threatening forms of violence. The rate of spousal homicide is eight times higher for Aboriginal women than for non-Aboriginal women. (Statistics Canada 2005)
- Very little data exist with respect to the extent or nature of violence in same-sex relationships. The 2004 GSS found that spousal violence was twice as high among homosexual couples than among heterosexual couples – 15% vs 7%, respectively.
- Among the spousal violence cases within same-sex couples, reported by a subset of police agencies over a 10-year period, 2.5% involved same-sex couples. (Ogrodnik, 2006)
- Women are very vulnerable when they are pregnant. The Violence Against Women Survey found that 21% of abused women were assaulted during pregnancy, and in 40% of these cases this was the beginning of the abuse.
- There has been an increase in the number of criminal harassment or stalking of women reported to police. In 2004, three-quarters of the victims of criminal harassment reported to police were women. In half of these cases, the woman was being stalked by a person with whom they've had an intimate relationship. (Statistics Canada, 2006)
- Intimate partner stalkers are found to be very dangerous. That is, stalkers are more likely to be violent with someone with whom they've had an intimate relationship. Stalking has been identified as one of the primary risk factors for attempted and actual murder of female partners. (McFarlane, et al, 2002)

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## 1.3 The Dynamics of Woman Abuse: Issues of Power and Control

Abuse is about power and control. It is the intentional and systematic use of tactics to establish and maintain power and control over the thoughts, beliefs and conduct of a woman. The tactics can include, but are not limited to the following:

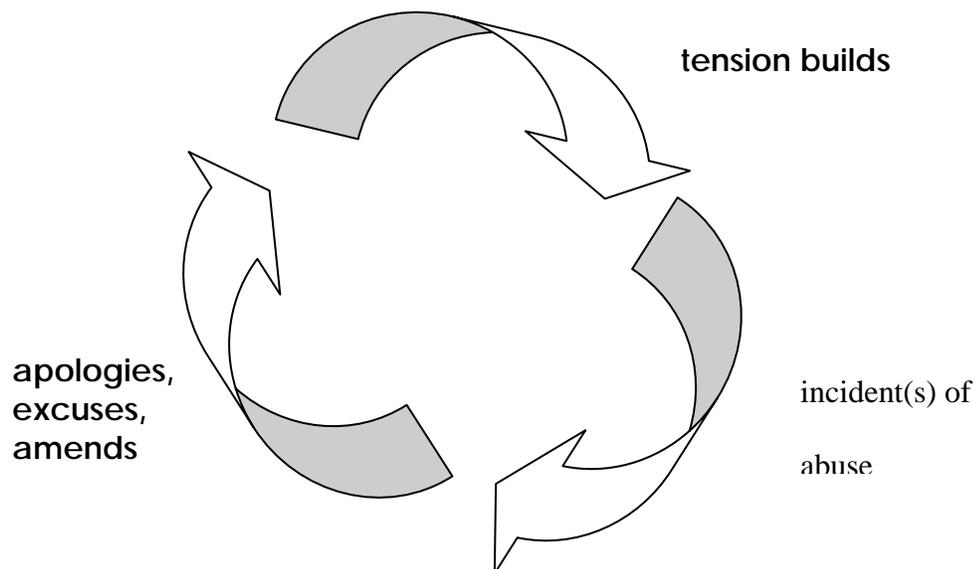


This model was developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project [www.duluth-model.org](http://www.duluth-model.org)

A Lesbian/Gay Power & Control Wheel is available at the National Council on Domestic and Sexual Violence [www.ncdsv.org](http://www.ncdsv.org)

## The Cycle of Abuse

Generally, battering does not occur constantly. Rather, it occurs in cycles. Abuse may be observed as a systematic pattern of behaviour. In many cases, abuse occurs in a repetitive sequence, often referred to as the “cycle of violence.” The cycle consists of three phases, the tension building phase, the phase in which abuse takes place, and the “honeymoon” phase where the abuser may exhibit kindness and loving behaviour.



**Tension-building phase:** During the tension-building phase, the abuser experiences a period of increasing stress and tension. This can build over a matter of hours, days or weeks, during which time the woman often tries to avoid an outburst by accommodating the demands of the abuser. Women may feel that they are “walking on eggshells.”

**Incident(s) of abuse:** When the pressure peaks, the abuser explodes, unleashing anger and rage, trying to control the situation through partner abuse. The “trigger” is rarely the woman’s behaviour, rather it could be an external stressor such as problems at work or a flat tire, or the internal state of the abuser.

**Making-up phase:** After the abusive incident, there may be a period of relief when the abuser offers apologies and promises to change. Both the abuser and the victim may want to believe that it won’t happen again.

This pattern occurs repeatedly over time. The duration between each phase varies between and within couples. The total cycle can take a few hours to a year or more to complete. But not all relationships fit this cycle. Often, the incidents of abuse become more frequent and severe, with shorter periods of relative calm.

