

# Chapter 18

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Also see the next chapter: Rape and Sexual Assault, page 327.

# Violence Against Women



**E**very day, women are slapped, kicked, beaten, humiliated, threatened, sexually *abused*, and even murdered by their partners. But often we do not hear about this violence, because the women who are abused may feel ashamed, alone, and afraid to speak out. Many doctors, nurses, and health workers do not recognize violence as the serious health problem it is.

This chapter is about different types of violence that occur to women and girls. It can help you understand why violence happens, what you can do about it, and how you can work for change in your community.

► *There is no reason why a person should be beaten or abused in any way.*

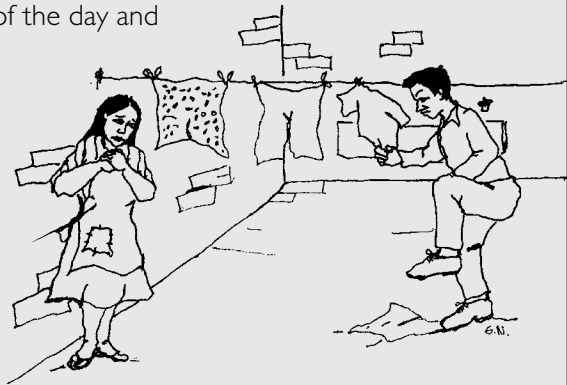
Although this chapter talks about violence between a woman and a man, violence can happen in any close relationship: for example, between a mother-in-law and her son's new wife, between parents and their children, between an older and younger child, between family members and an older person living in the home, and between partners of the same sex.

## The Story of Laura and Luis

Luis was 12 years older than Laura and was already a successful merchant when they met. He sold his goods to the store where Laura worked as a clerk to help her family pay the rent. Luis was charming and would talk about the kind of life they could have together. He told Laura he would buy her anything she wanted and she would be his “best woman.” He often bought her new clothes that he liked to admire her in, telling her how pretty she would be if she stopped dressing the way she did. He eventually began to see her every day, and soon asked her to quit her job and marry him.

After they married, Laura expected Luis to keep his promises. Instead, things began to change. He would not allow her to go out, because she “looked so ugly.” In fact, he took all the beautiful clothes he had bought her and burned them, saying, “That stupid, ugly woman didn’t deserve such clothes.”

One day Luis came home in the middle of the day and tore all the clean wash down from the line, accusing Laura of sleeping with his friend. When she said that she had just gone to visit her mother, Luis called her a lying whore and hit her. He said she would not go to visit her family—they did not want her either. He never said anything more about it, but when he came home later that night, he brought her a present and told her how much he loved her and wanted to take care of her.



When Laura got pregnant, she thought Luis would start treating her better. But it seemed to give him more excuses to hurt her. When he got angry, he started hitting and kicking her in the stomach. She was terrified she would lose the baby, but she had no place to go. She believed Luis when he said her family did not want her, and besides, she had no money of her own. There were times when Luis would go several weeks without losing control, and Laura would convince herself that everything was OK. He really did love her, after all. If only she could learn how to avoid setting him off. She would try even harder than before, but nothing helped.

Through the years, Luis drank too much, threw her against walls, and would force her to have sex even when her body ached from his beatings. Laura awoke one night to find him holding a knife to her throat. The next day, he told her she was imagining things, that she was crazy. He always said that if she told anyone “lies” about him he would kill her. She didn’t tell anyone and she went out as little as possible. She hated the thought of anyone seeing her bruises and knowing what he did to her. Laura often thought about leaving, but she did not know where to go.

After 12 years of being his wife, not only was Laura afraid of what he would do to her, but without him she would have no home, no money, no father for her children. Luis had said bad things about her to the people at the store where she used to work, and she knew that, because of her children, no one would take her in as a domestic servant. Laura felt so alone.

Laura's father was dead now and her mother lived with her brother's family. They did not have room for her and her children. Her sister was deeply religious and told Laura it was her duty to stay with her husband, even if she were killed. "That is the way it is meant to be." She had so much work to do at home she was always busy. And since Luis got mad when she went out or when someone came to visit, Laura stopped seeing her friends. She was sure they had long since given up on her. Besides, most people thought that it was okay for men to 'punish' their wives.

Then came the night when Laura's oldest daughter was 11. She came to Laura crying, saying Luis had hurt her "down there." Laura was shocked. She had thought the children would not be affected by Luis' behavior. She knew it would do no good to confront him, but she would NOT let it happen again.

When Laura lost her last pregnancy, the health worker who examined her asked about her injuries. Laura had made some excuse. The health worker nodded her head and gave Laura a card with an address in the next town. She told her if Laura ever needed to leave, she and her children could go there, but to make sure that she was ready to leave when she did. Laura was ready now.

**Why did Luis hit Laura? These are some of the wrong ideas that people have:**



*A man can do whatever he wants to his wife.*

**The truth:** No man has the right to beat his wife. Nothing a woman does gives a man the right to hurt her, even if he thinks she deserves it—even if she herself thinks she deserves it.



*It's just because he drinks...*

**The truth:** Alcohol does not cause violence, but it often makes it worse. Violence is also common in places where people do not drink alcohol.

*He wouldn't beat her if he didn't love her so much.*



**The truth:** Beating is not a sign of love. Love means showing respect and kindness.



*It's their business. It's not right to interfere with the private affairs of a couple.*

**The truth:** Violence is not just a family matter. Many women are hurt or killed. Violence is a social and community health problem.



*Only poor, ignorant men beat their wives.*

**The truth:** Violence is not just a problem of poverty or ignorance. Violence can happen in any home: rich or poor, educated or less educated, in the city or in rural areas.

*It is best for the children if she stays with him. He can still be a good father to them.*



**The truth:** It is not always better for the family when a woman stays with a violent man. He is teaching the children terrible, wrong ways to deal with their feelings, and about how women should be treated. He is not being good to his children if he is beating their mother—or them.

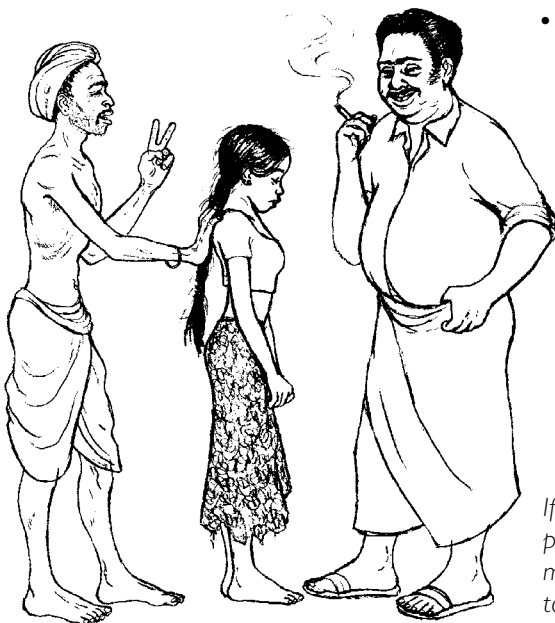
## Why Does a Man Hurt a Woman?

► *These reasons may explain why a man abuses his wife, but they do not give him permission to do so.*

► *Violent or abusive relationships often happen when one person has more power over the other.*



sex and gender roles



**A** man may offer many excuses for hurting a woman—that he was drunk, that he lost control, or that she ‘deserved it’. But a man **chooses** to use violence because it is a way he can get what he needs or what he feels is rightfully his as a man.

When a man does not feel that he has power over his own life, he may use violence to try and control another person’s life. It is natural for someone to want to control his or her own life in normal ways, but it is wrong to try and control someone else’s life, especially with violence. Here are some of the reasons why some men hurt women:

### 1. Violence works.

- It offers the man a quick end to a disagreement without having to talk about the real problem or find a real solution.
- A man may find the fight exciting, and have lots of energy afterward. He may want to have these feelings again.
- If a man uses violence, he ‘wins’ and gets his way. The victim is likely to give him his way again the next time to avoid being hurt. This gives the man even more power.

### 2. The man has a wrong idea about what it means to be a man.

- If a man believes that to be a man, he must control what a woman does, he may feel it is OK to hurt her.
- Some men think that they have a ‘right’ to certain things—to a ‘good’ wife, to sons, to making all the decisions in the family—just because they are men.

### 3. The man feels that the woman belongs to him, or that he needs her.

- If the woman is ‘strong’, the man may feel afraid that he will lose her, or that she does not need him. He will take steps to make her more dependent on him.

### 4. He does not know any other way to be.

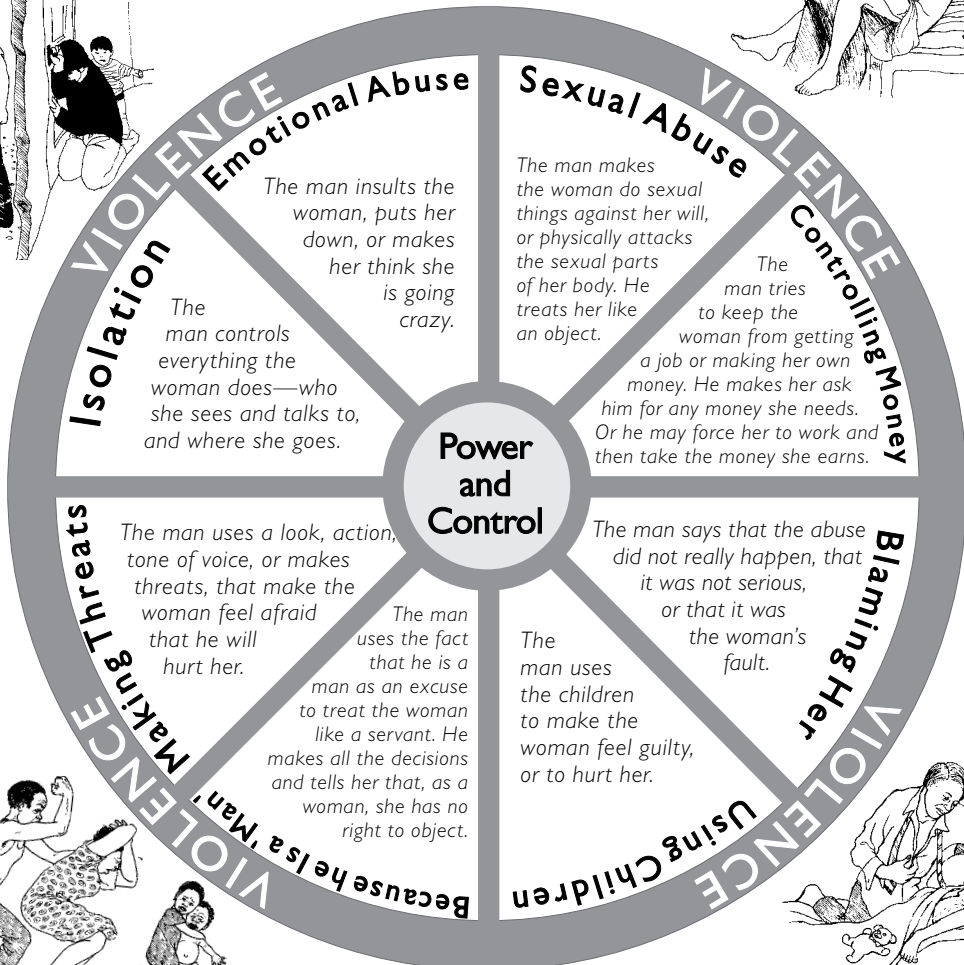
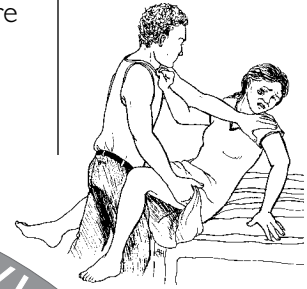
- If a man has seen his father or other people in his life react with violence when life is difficult and stressful, then he may have never learned any other way to behave.

*If men think of women and girls as their property—something they own—they are more likely to feel as though it is their right to treat them however they want.*

There are many different ways that a man tries to gain power over a woman. Beating is only one of them. But all of them can hurt a woman.

Imagine that the circle below is a wheel. Power and control are at the center of the wheel because they are the reasons behind all of the actions. Each section of the wheel is a behavior that a violent man may use to control a woman. Violence is the rim of the wheel—what holds it together and gives it strength.

## Kinds of Violence



### One form of abuse often turns into another

In many cases, verbal abuse becomes physical abuse after a while. It may not seem like it at first, but the man may slowly begin to 'accidentally' push or bump the woman, or begin to sit down in the place the woman usually sits, so that she has to move. If this behavior works for him, it may get worse until he becomes violent. Not all women who suffer other forms of abuse are beaten, but all women who have been beaten have suffered from other forms of abuse.

## Warning Signs

► *It does not matter how much you love a person. Love cannot change someone. Only that person can choose to change himself.*

**W**hen an abusive relationship becomes violent, it is much harder to leave. The longer a woman stays, the more control the man has over her, and the less faith she may have in herself. Some men are more likely to become violent than others. There are certain signs that may mean a man will become violent. If you see these signs, and have a way to get out of the relationship, think carefully.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Does he act jealous when you see other people, or accuse you of lying to him? If you find you change your behavior to keep him from acting jealous, then he is controlling you.
- Does he try to keep you from seeing your friends and family, or from doing things on your own? It does not matter what reason he uses. He is trying to keep you from having their support. It will be easier for him to abuse you if you have nowhere else to go.

*Stupid woman. I told you not to go out, especially looking as ugly as you do.*



- Does he insult you or make fun of you in front of other people? You may start to believe what he says. This can make you feel as though you deserve to be treated badly.
- What does he do when he gets angry? Does he break or throw things? Has he ever physically hurt you or threatened to hurt you? Has he ever hit another woman? All of these things show that he has trouble controlling the way he acts.
- Does he feel insulted by people with authority, such as his teachers, bosses, or his father? He may feel he has no power. This can make him try to gain power over other people in other areas of his life by using violence.

- Does he claim that alcohol, drugs, or stress are the reasons he acts the way he does? If he puts the blame on something else, he may say things will get better if he gets a new job, moves to a new town, or stops using drugs or alcohol.
- Does he blame you or someone else for the way he acts, or deny that he is doing anything wrong? He is less likely to want to change himself if he thinks that the way he acts is your fault.

**Some women are more likely to be abused**

In many couples, the man becomes violent for the first time when the woman is pregnant. He may feel as though he is losing control because he cannot control the changes in her body. He may feel angry because she is paying more attention to the baby and less to him, or because she may not want to have sex with him. Also, many couples feel extra worried about money when they are expecting a new baby.



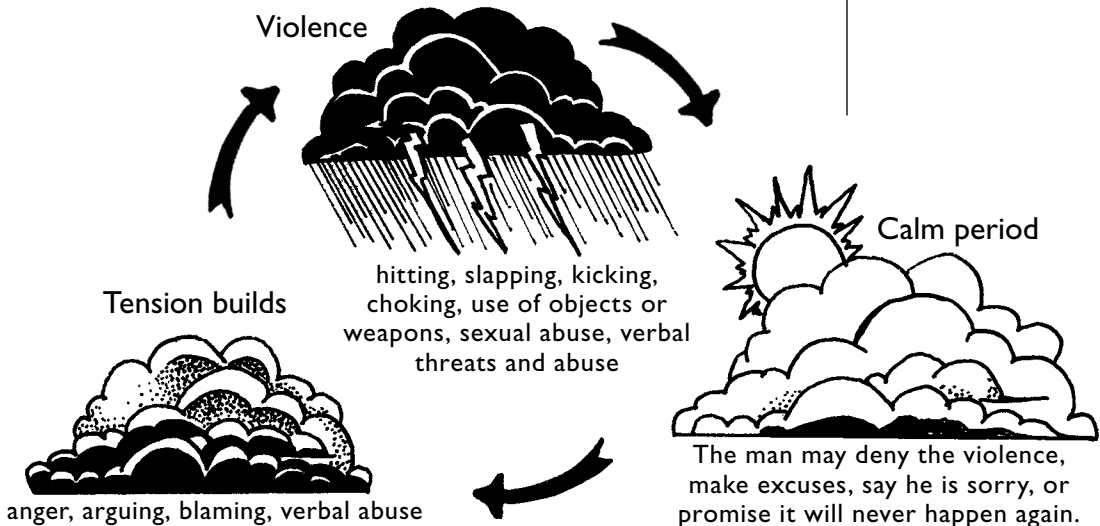
Women with disabilities are also more likely to be abused:

- Some men may feel angry that they did not get a 'perfect' woman.
- Men may think a woman with a disability is easier to control because she may be less able to defend herself.



The first violent attack often seems like an isolated event. But in many cases, after the violence first happens the following pattern, or cycle, develops:

**The Cycle of Violence**



As the violence goes on, the calm period gets shorter and shorter for many couples. As the woman's will is broken, the man's control over her becomes so complete that it is no longer necessary for him to make promises that things will get better.

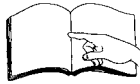
➤ Some women try to make the violence happen so that it will be over with more quickly, and to get to the calm period sooner.



## Harmful Effects of Violence



mental health



STIs, 261  
HIV and AIDS, 283  
lack of desire, 188

When a woman is abused at home, her children believe that this is how girls and women should be treated.



Violence not only hurts women. It also affects their children, and the whole community.

### Women

In women, men's violence can cause:

- lack of motivation or lack of a sense of self-worth.
- mental health problems, like *anxiety* and problems eating and sleeping. As a way to cope with the violence, women may begin harmful or reckless behavior—such as using drugs or alcohol, or having many sex partners.
- serious pain and injuries: broken bones, burns, black eyes, cuts, bruises, as well as headaches, belly pain, and muscle pains that may continue for many years after the abuse happens.
- sexual health problems. Many women suffer *miscarriages* from being beaten during pregnancy. They may also suffer from unwanted pregnancies, *sexually transmitted infections (STIs)* or be infected with *HIV* as a result of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse often also leads to a fear of having sex, pain during sex, and lack of desire.
- death.

### Children

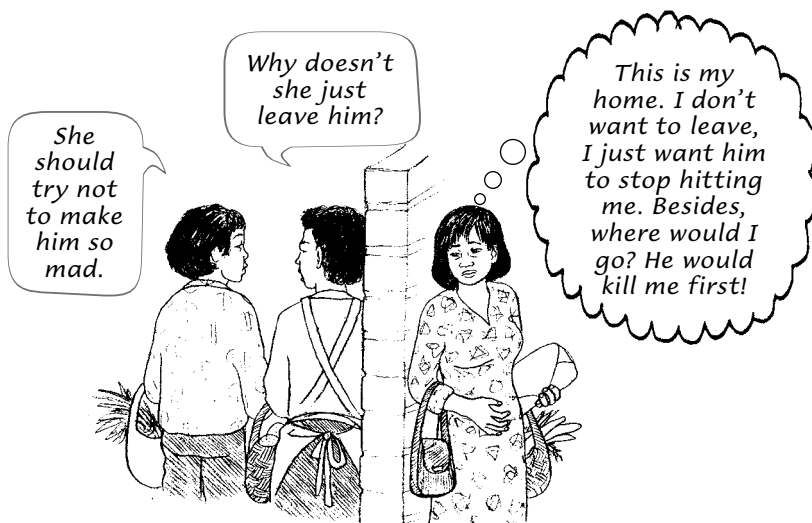
In children, seeing their mothers abused can often cause:

- angry or aggressive behavior—copying the violence. Or they may become very quiet and withdraw to escape notice.
- nightmares and other fears. Children in abusive families often do not eat well, grow and learn more slowly than other children, and have many illnesses, like stomach aches, headaches, and *asthma*.
- injury and death if the violence is turned on them.

### Community

In a community, violence can cause:

- the cycle of violence to continue into new generations.
- the continued false belief that men are better than women.
- everyone's quality of life to suffer because women take part less in their communities when they are silenced or killed by the violence.



“**W**hy does she stay?” is the first question most people ask when they hear about a woman who is being abused. There are many reasons why a woman might choose to stay in an abusive relationship. They include:

- **fear and threats.** The man may have told her, “I will kill you, kill the children, kill your mother... if you try to leave.” She may feel she is doing everything she can to protect herself and others by staying.
- **no money, and no place to go.** This is especially true if he has controlled all the money and not allowed her to see her family and friends.
- **no protection.** There may be nothing to stop him from coming after her and killing her.
- **shame.** She may feel the violence is somehow her fault, or that she deserves it.
- **religious or cultural beliefs.** She may feel it is her duty to keep the marriage together, no matter what it costs her.
- **hope for change.** She may feel she loves the man and wants the relationship to continue. She may think there is some way to make the violence stop.
- **guilt about leaving the children with no father.**

But perhaps a better question to ask is, “Why doesn’t **he** go?” If we ask why **she** does not leave, it says that we think it is **her** personal problem to solve. It is wrong to think of the violence as only her problem.

- The whole community needs to be responsible for the health and well-being of every person in that community.
- It is the **man** who is committing a crime by violating the woman’s right to live free from physical harm, or by killing her. His actions should be challenged and stopped.

## Why Women Stay with Men Who Hurt Them

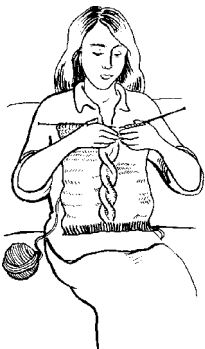
► If we ask why she does not leave, it says that we think the violence is her personal problem to solve. The whole community needs to be responsible for the health and well-being of every person in that community.

## What to Do

► *Think about these things even if you do not think the violence will ever happen again.*



*Find someone you trust who can help you sort out your feelings and think about your choices.*



*Do you have skills that you can use to earn extra money?*

## MAKE A SAFETY PLAN

A woman does not have control over her partner's violence, but she does have choices about the way she responds to him. She can also try to plan ahead how she can get herself and her children to safety until the man stops being violent.

### Safety before the violence happens again

- Tell someone nearby about the violence. Ask that person to come or to get help if the person hears that you are in trouble. Perhaps a neighbor, male relative, or a group of women or men can come before you are seriously hurt.
- Think of a special word or signal that will tell your children or someone else in your family to get help.
- Teach your children how to get to a safe place.

### Safety during the violence

- If you can tell that he is going to become violent, try to have it happen where there are no weapons or objects that he can use to harm you, and where you can get away.
- Use your best judgement. Do whatever you need to do to calm him down so that you and your children are safe.
- If you need to get away from him, think about how you can escape. Where is the safest place to go?

### Safety when a woman gets ready to leave

- Save money any way that you can. Put money in a safe place (away from the house) or open a bank account in your own name so you can become more independent.
- If you can do so safely, think of other things you can do to become less dependent on him, such as making friends, joining a group, or spending more time with your family.
- See if there are 'safe houses' or other services for women who have been abused. These are special places in some towns and cities where abused women and their children can stay for a while. Try to find out before you leave if there is one that you can get to.
- Ask friends or relatives you trust if they would let you stay with them or lend you money. Be sure they will not tell your partner that you asked.
- Get copies of important documents, such as your identification or your children's vaccination records. Keep a copy at home and give a copy to someone you trust.
- Leave money, copies of your documents, and extra clothes with someone you trust so that you can leave quickly.
- If you can do it safely, practice your escape plan with your children to see if it would work. Make sure the children will not tell anyone.

**IF YOU LEAVE**

*I wanted to leave my husband, but I did not have any money of my own. So my aunt let me help her sell things in the market. I also made some money by taking care of other people's children. After 2 years I had some money saved. So one day I took the children and left. Sometimes it is hard to live on the money I make, but not as hard as living with all the beatings.*

If you decide to leave, you will need to be prepared for some of the new difficulties you will face:

**Safety.** The most dangerous time for a woman is after she leaves. The man has lost control over her and will usually do anything to get it back. He may even try to follow through on his threat to kill her. She must make sure she is staying in a safe place that he does not know about or where she is protected. She should not tell anyone where she is staying. He may be able to force them to tell him where she is.

**Surviving on your own.** You need to find a way to support yourself and your children. If you can stay with friends or family, use that time to get more education or learn job skills. To save money, maybe you can share a place to live with another woman who also was abused.

**Feelings.** All the things you need to do to set up a new life may feel like too much to face. You may feel scared and lonely because you are not used to being alone in a strange place. You may miss your partner—no matter what he did to you. When things seem very difficult, you may not remember how bad it really was before you left. Give yourself time to feel sad about the loss of your partner and your former life. Try to stay strong. See if you can find other women in the same situation as you. Together you can support each other.

**F**or change to happen, people must stop thinking of violence against women as something that 'is just the way things are' or that is the woman's fault. Here are some ideas for helping stop violence in your community.

**TALK ABOUT IT**

Talking about the abuse is the first step to changing it. Try to find other women who have the same problems with violent and abusive men and share ideas with each other. Find men who believe that violence is wrong. Make violence something people talk about. Make it into something that people think is wrong.



starting a support group

**Working for Change**

► *Be careful! In some communities, working against violence can be dangerous.*

## SET UP SERVICES TO HELP WOMEN WHO LEAVE



- Set up a 'safe house' or shelter as soon as possible. Keep the place hidden and secret.
- Get support from others—especially larger, more powerful organizations. For example, see if there is a network of health organizations in your country that can help. You can also talk with respected community members whom you trust. Get as many men as possible to work with you.
- Help women learn about their rights under the law. There may be special laws about families and violence that women can use.
- Find ways to train women in new skills, so that abused women have a way to support themselves.

## USE SOCIAL PRESSURE

What are the pressures that prevent people where you live from doing things that most people believe are wrong? In some places, it is the police. In others it may be the military, the family, or religion. In most places, it is a combination of these things.

Encourage community leaders and other men to speak out against violence against women and to show their disapproval of men who beat women. Try and use all of the pressures that work where you live to keep men from abusing women.

In some countries, women have organized to get laws passed that punish men who abuse their wives. But laws do not always work well for abused women. In some places, the people who are supposed to enforce the laws—especially the police, the lawyers, and the judges—cannot be trusted to help. But if the legal system and the police both work to protect women where you live, try to learn as much as you can about the laws and about women's rights.

Raise your children to lead non-violent lives. You can work for change at home by helping your children find peaceful ways to solve problems. Teach boys to respect themselves and to respect girls and women.



*In some communities in Central America, men volunteer to patrol their communities to warn the people of attacks, and to keep them safe from crime. In these communities, violence against women is not tolerated. If a man is caught beating his wife, he knows the other men in the town will punish him.*

**H**ealth workers can take a more active role in stopping violence against women. It is not enough just to take care of a woman's wounds.

**When you examine a woman, look for signs of abuse.**

Men often beat their wives where the marks will not show. Women who have been beaten may wear clothing to hide it. As a health worker, you are one of the few people who sees the private parts of her body.

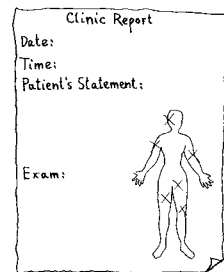
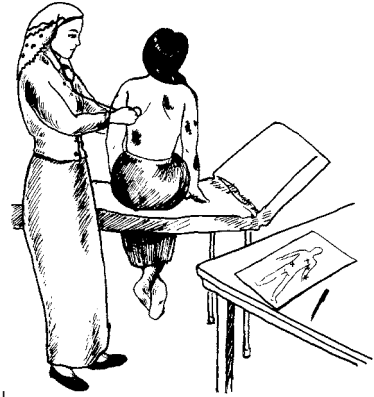
If you see an unusual mark, bruise, or scar, ask her how it happened. Or if a woman comes to you in pain, bleeding, or with broken bones or other injuries, ask her if she has been beaten. Remember that many beaten women will say they got injured by accident. Assure her that you will not do anything she does not want you to do.

**Write everything down.** When you see a woman who has been abused, draw a picture of the front and back of her body and mark the places where she has been injured.



Write down the name of the person who abused her. Try to find out how many times this has happened before. Ask if other family members, such as her sisters or her children, have also been abused. If she is in danger, help her decide what she wants to do. Whether or not she wants to leave, you can help her make a safety plan. If she wants to go to the police, go with her. You can help make sure they take her claim seriously (and do not abuse her themselves). Help her make contact with other women who have been abused. Together they may be able to find solutions.

## To the Health Worker



► For information about how to treat a woman's injuries, see **Where There Is No Doctor** or another general medical book.

**What resources are available for abused women? Look for:**

- legal help.
- money-earning projects for women.
- programs that teach adults to read and write, or other education services.
- safe houses.
- mental health services.

**Help the man.** In some communities, men have formed groups to help other men stop using violence. Through discussions and role plays, these groups help men learn new ways to express their feelings and to control their behavior. Ask religious and community leaders to help start a group like this and to convince all men that they are responsible for ending violence against women.

► Help your community to see the harmful effects of violence.