

# Chapter 18

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## How to use this chapter:

This chapter is about violence directed at women and girls because of their gender. This information can help you understand why this violence happens, what you can do about it, and how to work to change the conditions that allow violence in your community. Also see Chapter 19: Rape and Sexual Violence (page 327).

This issue affects anyone who identifies as a woman or a girl. In this chapter we describe specific examples of violence against women and girls and share stories of women who have experienced this violence. You may find these descriptions upsetting or difficult to read. Please read with care and refer to the resources for more information and support (see page 564).

# Violence Against Women



Every day, women are slapped, kicked, humiliated, threatened, sexually abused, denied resources, and even murdered because they are women. We often do not hear about this gender-based violence (see box below) because these women may feel ashamed and afraid to speak out. Many people, including health workers, do not recognize this violence as the serious health problem it is.

Violence against women happens most often at home and most often by a woman's partner. But gender-based violence can happen in any close relationship, including between parents and their children or between partners of the same gender. It can also happen between people who do not know each other

► No person should be beaten or abused in any way for any reason.

## What is gender-based violence?

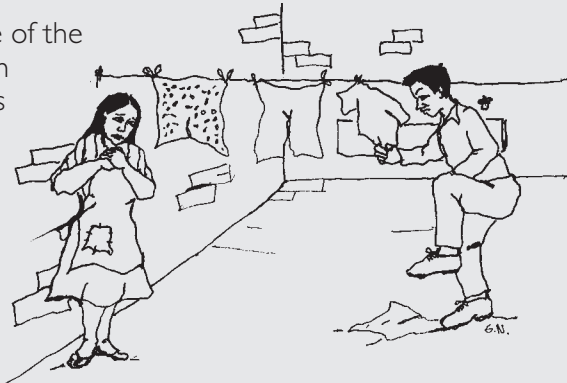
Gender-based violence is when a person is harmed because of their gender identity, presentation, or role (see page 182). Violence done to women and girls to enforce gender roles and women's lower status is gender-based violence. Harm done to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people can also be gender-based violence because their lives challenge rigid ideas about masculinity and femininity. A person harmed by gender-based violence always has less power than the person causing harm, and the harm often has lifelong effects on mental and physical health.

## 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's 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 was Luis violent with Laura? Here is how some people respond:



*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 another person 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, although 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. Violence is a social and community health problem. Many women are hurt or killed by their partners.



*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; more educated or less educated, in the city or in rural areas.

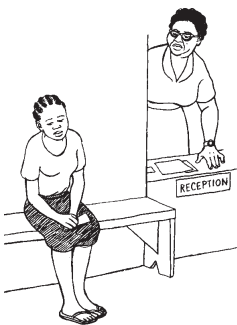
*It is best for the children if she stays with him. He can still be a good father to them.*



**The truth:** Children learn how to act as adults by watching their parents. A violent man teaches his children unhealthy ways to deal with their feelings and wrong ideas about how women should be treated. He is not being good to his children if he is beating their mother—or them.

## How Gender Inequality Supports Violence

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



*When health workers provide safe and supportive spaces for women who experience violence, it lessens their fear and shame.*

Some people act like they have the right to control other people's lives. This is true for men who are in positions of power as well as for those with little power over their own lives. Women's low status makes them common targets for control, often through violence.

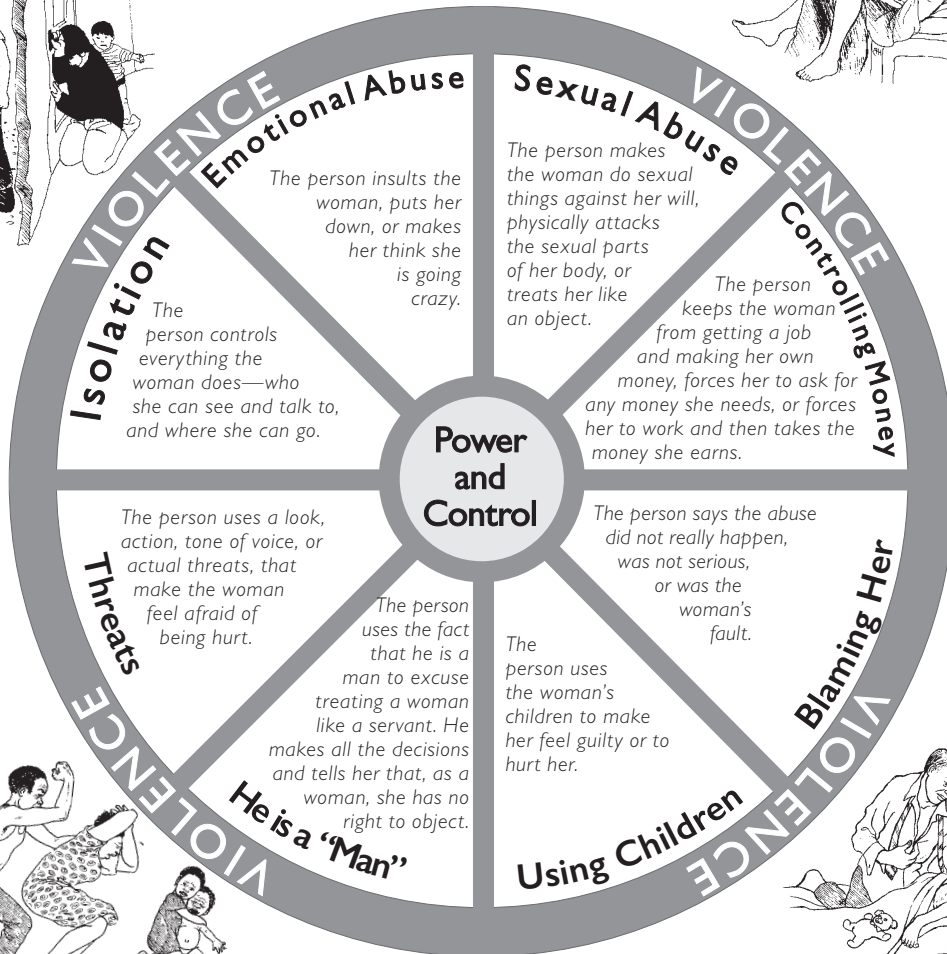
It may seem like violence against women is a problem of certain people, couples, or families. But community attitudes, customs, and laws often allow violence. Understanding how community beliefs may encourage violence and how difficult it can be to change them does not excuse anyone for using violence against women.

1. Differences in power between genders
  - In most places, men are considered more important and valuable than other people. This idea is used to justify mistreating women and people of other gender identities.
  - Many forms of discrimination keep women less powerful than men, such as preventing women and girls from going to school, forbidding women to work outside the home or owning property, and making women dependent on men financially.
2. Wrong ideas about what it means to be a man
  - If people believe that being men means being violent, then they may feel it is OK to hurt women.
  - If people believe that being men means having control, then they may view women as their property.
  - If the larger community has these same ideas, they will not question the actions of men who are violent and controlling.
3. Wrong ideas that violence is an individual or private problem
  - If the community believes that violence against women is an individual problem, a "private" or "family" matter; not affected by community actions, and not affecting the entire community, then community members are less likely to take action against it and more likely to look the other way and not get involved.
4. Shame and fear
  - Women who experience violence are unlikely to report it to authorities or health workers because of guilt, shame, and judgement within their communities. Where a woman's honor is valued, she may not report violence out of fear that she will lose respect in her community.
  - In many places, authorities and health workers do not respond seriously to violence against women.

There are many different ways that someone may try to gain power over a woman. All of them are harmful.

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 someone may use to control a woman. Violence is the rim of the wheel—what holds it together and gives it strength.

## Kinds of Violence



### Abuse often becomes more harmful over time

Many women who are physically abused were abused in other ways in the same relationship. Physical abuse often begins after a period of verbal or emotional abuse, which the abuser feels is not successful in controlling the woman the way they want. All forms of abuse are wrong and should be taken seriously. Do not wait for the abuse to get worse. Find help as quickly as possible. See page 322 for more information.

## Warning Signs of Physical Abuse

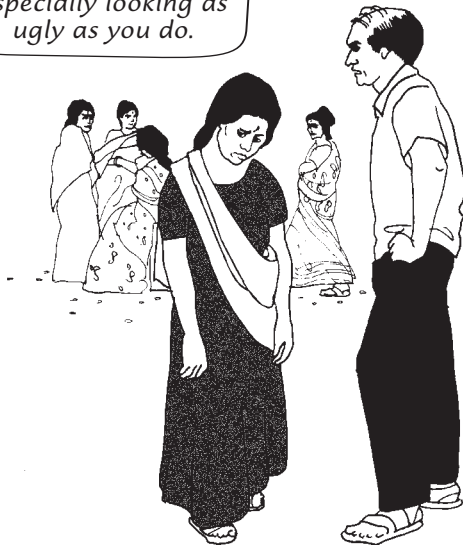
► *It does not matter how much you love a person. Love cannot change someone. Only that person can choose to change.*

**R**elationships with emotional or verbal abuse may later become physically violent. When an abuser shows the signs below, they are more likely to become increasingly and physically violent. Try to get help. See page 322 for more information.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Does the person act jealous when you see other people, or accuse you of lying? If you find you change your behavior to prevent this jealousy, then they are controlling you.
- Does the person try to keep you from seeing your friends and family or from doing things on your own? Whatever reasons they use do not matter. They are trying to keep you from having outside support. Abusing you will be easier if you have nowhere else to go.
- Does the person insult you or make fun of you in front of other people? You may start to believe the insults are true. This can make you feel as though you deserve to be treated badly.

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



- What does the person do when they are angry? Do they break or throw things? Have they ever physically hurt you or threatened to hurt you? Have they ever hit another woman? All of these things show that they have trouble controlling their actions.
- Does the person feel bullied by people with authority, such as teachers, bosses, or parents? Their lack of power or respect can make them feel they can get power over other people by using violence.
- Does the person blame alcohol, drugs, or stress for their actions? They may say things will get better if they get a new job, move to a new town, or stop using drugs or alcohol.

- Does the person blame you or someone else for how they act or deny that they are doing anything wrong? They are less likely to want to change if they think that how they act is someone else's fault.

### Abuse during pregnancy and for people with disabilities

If you are pregnant, has your partner become more controlling or angry that you are less sexually available? Some people first experience violence from a partner during a pregnancy.

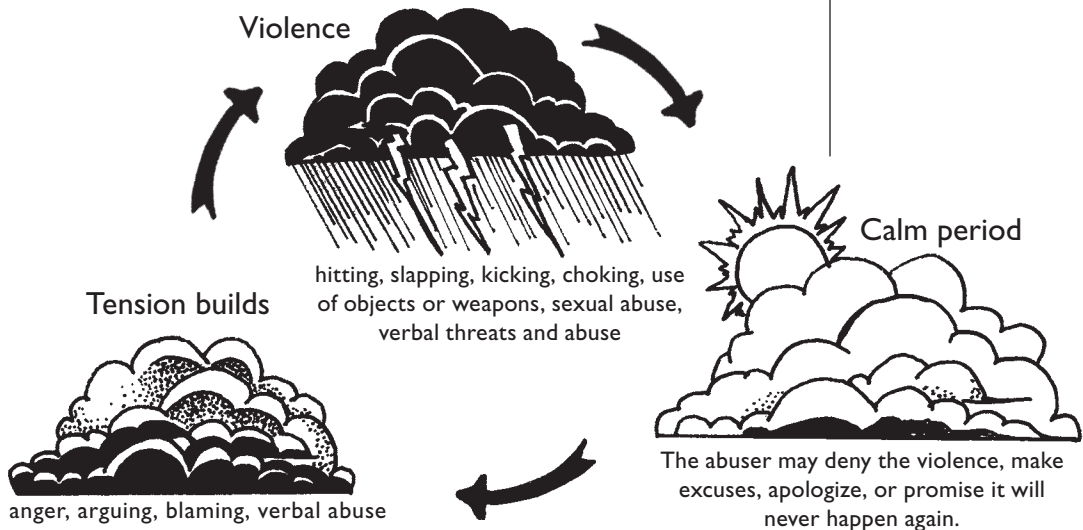


Do you have a disability? Women with disabilities face many forms of violence and are abused more often than women without disabilities. This includes emotional and physical abuse, sexual assault, neglect in caregiving, and isolation from family, friends, and community.



Violence in a relationship often follows a pattern that repeats over time. The first time may seem like an isolated event, but in many cases a cycle develops.

### The Cycle of Violence



For some people, the cycle of violence happens in only a few hours. For others, it lasts a few months. As time goes on, the calm period gets shorter and the cycles happen more often.



## Harmful Effects of Violence



mental health



STIs, 261  
HIV, 283  
loss of desire, 188

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



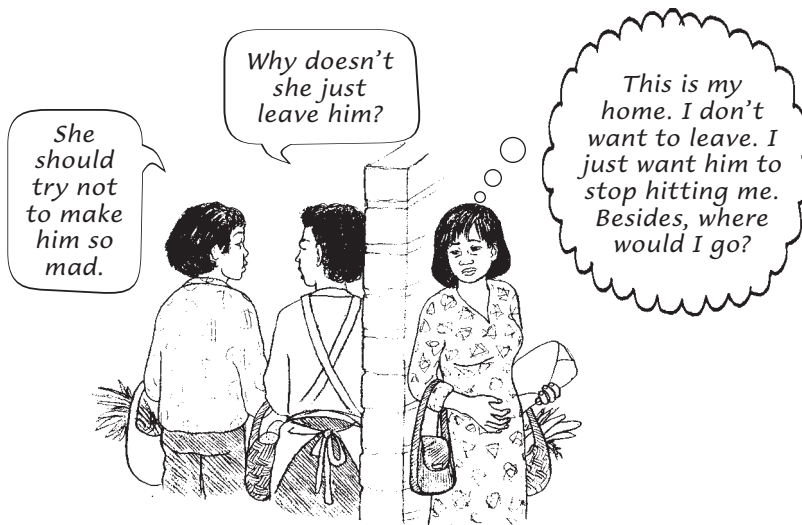
Violence against women hurts women, their children, and the whole community.

Violence against women can cause:

- mental health challenges such as low self-worth, *depression*, *anxiety*, and problems with eating or sleeping. Some women try to cope with abuse by using drugs or alcohol.
- physical injuries such as broken bones, burns, cuts, and bruises, as well as longer term health problems like headaches, back and muscle pain, and digestive system problems. Women who are violently abused are also more likely to develop diabetes and heart problems.
- sexual health problems such as unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Sexual abuse may lead to loss of sexual desire, fear of having sex, and pain during sex.
- pregnancy complications. Violence during pregnancy can cause miscarriage and babies born very small or very early.
- death.

When children witness violence against women, this can cause:

- physical injury if children are caught in the violence or try to protect women.
  - mental health challenges such as low sense of self-worth, anxiety, depression, sleep problems and nightmares, or behavior problems. Some children learn from seeing violence to become angry or aggressive, while others withdraw to escape notice. Older children may try to cope through drug use and sexual activity.
  - physical health problems. Violence in families can keep children from getting healthy food or medical care. Children may develop signs like stomach aches, headaches, and breathing problems.
- In the community, violence against women can cause:
- the loss of women's voices and ideas when they become isolated, repressed, and participate less in the community.
  - the continued low status of women.
  - the continued cycle of violence when the community does not act to end it.



## Why Women Stay with People Who Hurt Them

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

- **fear and threats.** Her abuser may have threatened to kill her, her children, or other loved ones, or do other harm if she leaves. She may feel she is protecting herself and others by staying.
- **no money.** If the abuser has prevented her from earning money and controls all their money, she may have no access to cash and no way to support herself and her children.
- **no place to go.** If the abuser has isolated her from family and friends, and there are no resources in her community for women leaving abusive relationships, she may have no place to go.
- **no protection.** Often police and medical workers do not consider violence against women as a crime. She may have little protection from her abuser if she leaves.
- **religious and cultural beliefs.** Some religions and cultures think it is more important to “save” a couple’s relationship or prevent divorce than to stop violence against a woman.
- **shame.** She may feel the violence is somehow her fault, or it is her failure if the relationship with her abuser ends.
- **hope for change.** She may focus on what is good in the relationship and think she can make the violence stop.

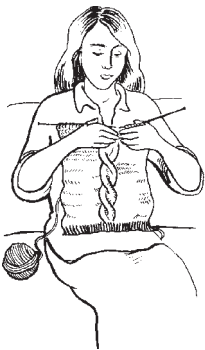
When we ask why a woman does not leave, it says that we think it is her personal problem to solve. The whole community must be responsible for the health and well-being of every person. An abuser who violates a woman’s right to live free from physical harm must be challenged and stopped. See pages 323 to 325 for more information.

## 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 money?*

## MAKE A SAFETY PLAN

A woman does not have control over her partner's violent behavior. But she can try to plan how to get herself and her children safely away from that person.

### Safety before the violence happens again

- If you have a neighbor you trust, tell them about the violence and ask them to get help if they see or hear violence at your home.
- Try to keep some money with you at all times (enough for transportation or phone calls).
- Know where the nearest phone is or keep your charged mobile phone with you.
- Teach your children not to get between you and your abuser if violence happens.
- Teach your children where to go and how to get away safely.
- Find someone you trust who can help you sort out your feelings and think about your choices.

### Safety during the violence

- If you think your partner is going to be violent, move to a room with a telephone, or with a door or window to escape through. Avoid rooms with knives (like the kitchen) or other weapons, or rooms where you could become trapped.

### Safety when a woman gets ready to leave

- Try to save a small amount of money each week. Keep it in a safe place away from home, or open a bank account in your own name.
- Pack and leave an emergency suitcase with someone you trust. Try to include copies of important documents, like identification for you and your children, money, medications, and extra clothes.
- Do you have skills that you can use to earn money?
- Think of other things you can do safely to become more independent, like joining a community group or spending more time with your family.
- Look for shelters in your community where women who have been abused and their children can stay for a while.
- If you can do it safely, practice your escape plan with your children. Make sure the children will not tell anyone.
- Do not tell your abuser you are planning to leave. It is best to leave when your abuser is not around.

## 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 just after she leaves an abusive partner. Her abuser has lost control over her and might do anything to get it back. They may even try to kill her if they had threatened to do that. Finding a safe place to stay is important, somewhere that the abuser does not know about and is well protected. She should not tell anyone where she is staying, so her abuser cannot find that out.

Living independently. When a woman leaves, she will need to find a way to support herself and her children. Staying with friends or family may give her time to get more education or job skills. Or she may be able to share a living space with other women who have left abusive situations.

**Feelings.** Setting up a new life after leaving an abuser may feel like too much to face. A woman may feel scared and lonely because she is not used to being alone in a strange place. She may even miss her abuser, despite what that person did to her. She will need time to feel sad about the loss of her former life. Talking with others in a similar situation may be a helpful source of support.

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

## TALK ABOUT IT

Talking more openly in your community about violence against women is the first step to changing it. Make it clear that people in your community think it is wrong and will not tolerate it. Find other women who have experienced violence or abuse and share ideas so you can work together. Then include other community members, especially men, who will speak out against violence and abuse.



starting a support group

**Working for Change**

## SET UP SERVICES TO HELP WOMEN WHO LEAVE



- Set up a shelter for women who leave abusive relationships. Keep the location a secret.
- Help women learn about their legal rights. There may be specific laws they can use to take action against their abusers and protect themselves.
- Help women who leave abusive relationships to learn new skills so they can support themselves and their children.
- Look for both financial and public support, especially from larger, more powerful organizations. Getting resources and endorsements from different merchants and health, religious, and women's groups can strengthen your work.

## USE SOCIAL PRESSURE

*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.*

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.

Ask community leaders to speak out against violence against women and to show their disapproval of people who abuse women. Use all of the pressures that work where you live to stop this violence.

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.

In some communities, men have formed groups to teach other men to stop using violence. Through discussions and role-plays, these groups help men learn new ways to express their feelings. Ask religious and community leaders to help start groups like this and to promote the idea that all men are responsible for ending violence against women.

Children learn how to act as adults by watching their parents. Teach your children healthy ways to deal with their feelings and solve problems, and use these in your own life. Teach everyone in your family to respect girls and women.

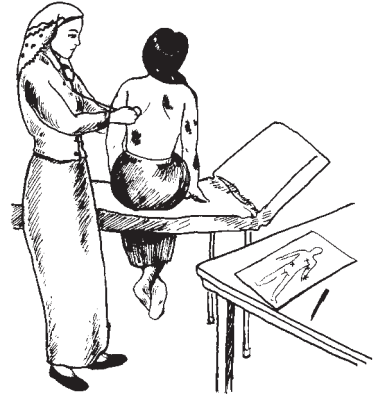


It is not enough just to take care of a woman's wounds. Health workers can take a more active role in stopping violence against women.

**When you examine a woman, look for signs of abuse.** When you examine women during regular medical check-ups, look for signs of abuse. Abusers who are physically violent often injure women where the marks will not show. Women who have been beaten may wear clothing to hide their injuries. As a health worker, you are one of the few people who sees these places on her body.

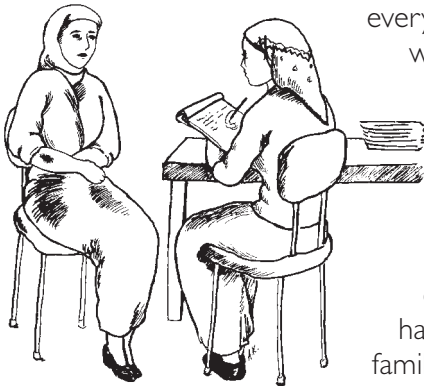
If you see an unusual mark, bruise, or scar, ask her how it happened. Or if a woman comes to you in pain, bleeding, or with broken bones or other injuries, ask her if she has been abused. Remember that many abused women will say they got injured by accident. Assure her that you will not do anything without her permission.


## To the Health Worker



**Write everything down.** 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.



Clinic Report	
Date:	
Time:	
Patient's Statement:	
Exam:	

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

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

- legal help.
- safe houses.
- money-earning projects for women.
- mental health services.
- adult education programs for reading, writing, computers, and other skills.