



# VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE FAMILY



## What is Violence Against Women and Girls?

Violence against women and girls means any act of violence – physical, sexual or emotional – that is committed against a woman or girl because she is female. This violence can occur in a woman’s or girl’s private or public life, and can be committed by someone she knows or a stranger. Violence against women within the family is primarily perpetrated by men against women. When it is children who are the victims of violence within the family, it is most often girl children, and that violence is primarily committed by fathers and/or older brothers.

## What is domestic violence?

*Domestic violence* is the term most frequently used by government and institutions such as the police, courts and health care providers. It refers to all violence – adult to adult, adult to child, child to adult - that occurs in the domestic (i.e. family) setting.

## Does it matter which term we use?

The language we use to identify a social problem is very important. Because the violence that women experience, both within the family and elsewhere, is largely rooted in sexism and misogyny, we need to name the gendered nature of that violence. If we do not, we will not be able to create appropriate responses or work towards ending the violence.



## Violence against Women and Girls in Canada

- Half of all women in Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 15
- Every six days, a woman is killed by her partner or former partner
- While men also report being abused, 83% of all police-reported assaults are against women. Three times as many women as men experience serious violence. Women are much more likely to be injured and to fear for their lives
- Approximately 3,000 women and 2,500 children enter women’s shelters to escape violence
- Violence against women in Canada costs more than \$5 billion a year in terms of police, court, medical and other expenses

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## Violence Against Women and Girls in Muslim communities in Canada

It is important to remember that violence against women and girls occurs in all communities regardless of race, culture, religion and socio-economic status. Recent research looking at Muslim marriage and divorce in North America found that approximately one-third of the women interviewed had experienced abuse within their marriage, which is at a similar rate to women in the general population.

While the existence of violence against women and girls is the same across communities, there can be differences in the details of the violence. In some communities, religion or culture may be used to justify the use of physical force against women and girls. In some, violence against women within the family may be perpetrated not just by men but also by other women in the family.

According to research, violence against women and girls in Muslim communities tends to occur most often in families where the husband/father is resistant or unable to let go of old patterns of marital interaction and gender expectations.



## Warning signs

While there is no one way to identify violence against women and girls, because it takes different forms for different women, there are some common indicators to be aware of:

- A woman's husband puts her down and tries to embarrass her or make her look stupid in front of others
- The husband makes all the decisions and controls all the family's money
- The husband does all the talking and cuts his wife off if she tries to express an opinion
- Signs of physical injuries, especially bruising and burning, which the woman may attempt to cover or hide
- Poor explanations for injuries
- Signs of emotional harm, such as nervousness (especially when her husband is present), excessive sadness or depression
- Missed work or poor work performance by the woman
- Increased isolation of the woman (e.g. she withdraws from spending time with her friends and even her family)

Of course, just because you observe one or two of these indicators does not mean the woman or girl is being abused. However, if you notice a number of them over a period of time, if she seems frightened or unwilling to talk if you raise your concerns with her and/or if her husband/father/male family member is dismissive or angry if you ask him, then you have good reason to be concerned.

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## Responses to Violence Against Women and Girls in Canada

- The *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and human rights legislation guarantee freedom from discrimination on the basis of sex
- In Canada, a woman must consent to sexual activity. If she does not, and the man persists, it is illegal and is called sexual assault. This is true even when the man and woman are husband and wife
- Physical assault is also prohibited under the *Criminal Code*, as is stalking behaviour. In most parts of the country, the police will charge a man whether or not the woman wants them to: this is known as mandatory charging
- Most provinces have laws dealing with custody, access and child protection that address issues related to violence within the family



### Barriers for women from Muslim communities

It is not easy for any woman to leave an abusive partner. Women in Muslim communities must deal with the same challenges as all women, but also with some barriers that may be unique to their situation. For instance, a woman who is a newcomer to Canada may not know about the laws or her legal rights. She may not trust the authorities such as the police and courts. She may have concerns about her or her husband's immigration/refugee status if she reports the abuse. She may fear that her husband will take the children and return to their country of origin. If she is isolated, she may not know about community services or may speak only limited English. Available services may not bring a culturally competent approach to their work, so she may not wish to use them.



### Ideas for moving forward

A great deal is already being done to address violence against women in Muslim communities in Canada. For example, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women offers resources and support to Muslim women in Canada ([www.ccmw.com](http://www.ccmw.com))

Communities could learn from and build on a model such as London, Ontario's Muslim Resource Centre for Social Support and Integration ([www.mrcssi.com](http://www.mrcssi.com))

### More generally

- Any strategy to end violence against women must involve men, especially young men
- Involving religious and community leaders is also extremely important: women should not have to leave their religious and cultural beliefs and communities behind in order to leave violent situations
- Mainstream agencies providing services to women who have experienced violence need to do more to ensure they provide what is needed by women from Muslim and other cultures whose values may be different from those of mainstream Canadian society
- Communities need to work together to find innovative approaches to responding to and working to end violence against women in communities



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### Helpful resources

Alkhateeb, Sharifa. "Muslim Wheel of Domestic Violence." *The Centre for Children and Families in the Justice System*, 10 Dec. 2012 <[http://www.lfcc.on.ca/muslim\\_wheel\\_of\\_domestic\\_violence.html](http://www.lfcc.on.ca/muslim_wheel_of_domestic_violence.html)>.

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Macfarlane, Julie. "Understanding Trends in American Muslim Divorce and Marriage: A Discussion Guide for Families and Communities." 5 Jan. 2012, *The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding*, 9 Feb. 2013 <<http://www.ispu.org/getreports/35/2399/publications.aspx>>.

Riley, Krista. "Violence in the Lives of Muslim Girls and Women in Canada: Symposium Discussion Paper." Sep. 2011, *The Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children*, 15 Feb. 2013 <<http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/sites/default/files/Violence%20in%20the%20Lives%20of%20Muslim%20Girls%20and%20Women.pdf>>.

World Health Organization. "Understanding and Addressing Violence Against Women." 2012, *The World Health Organization*, 3 Feb. 2013 <[http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/77431/1/WHO\\_RHR\\_12.43\\_eng.pdf](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/77431/1/WHO_RHR_12.43_eng.pdf)>.

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