

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT WOMAN ABUSE

Myths and stereotypes about woman abuse often isolate abused women and prevent them from accessing and receiving appropriate services.

MISCONCEPTION: *Is woman abuse a private family matter?*

FACT: Woman abuse is not a private family matter. Woman abuse is a widespread societal problem that has devastating effects for individual victims, their children and their communities (National Clearinghouse on Family Violence). Further, some of the tactics of woman abuse including physical and sexual abuse, threats, harassment, and stalking are criminal offences and therefore not a private matter. Keeping woman abuse private only serves to support the perpetrator of abuse and does not protect the women and children who are subjected to it.

MISCONCEPTION: *Is woman abuse a new problem?*

FACT: Woman abuse is a chosen act against a chosen victim. The abuser intends to seek compliance from or control over the victim. It is an act which has been condoned by society for centuries. In 18th century England, laws gave husbands the right to "discipline" their wives. One law, the Rule of Thumb, gave men the right to whip their wives with a switch no thicker than their thumb. Also, until 1965, in Canada, a husband would not be charged with assaulting his partner unless the woman could prove sufficient bodily harm (Dobash and Dobash, 1979). Moreover, it was not until 1985 that a man could be charged with sexually assaulting his wife. The historical unequal power relations between men and women have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men.

MISCONCEPTION: *Does woman abuse only happen to poor or uneducated women?*

FACT: Women from all ages, socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, educational, occupational and religious groups are abused. Perpetrators of woman abuse can be found in all age, cultural, socioeconomic, educational occupational and religious groups.

MISCONCEPTION: *Is woman abuse a rare occurrence inflicted upon only a few women?*

FACT: Woman abuse is often referred to as an epidemic in our society. In 1993, Statistics Canada found that 3 in 10 married or common-law women reported experiencing abuse where criminal charges were warranted. These statistics do not include women in dating relationships and non-criminal behaviour such as emotional abuse or using isolation. Between 1974 and 1993, the number of Canadian women murdered by their partners has been approximately 78 women per year.

MISCONCEPTION: *Is a "Domestic Dispute" a dispute/argument which has gone too far?*

FACT: Woman abuse is not a dispute which has become out of hand. It is the intentional action of one individual to gain and maintain power and control over another. It is about gaining control over and individual, not losing one's control. Abusers are making choices about their actions even when they are claiming that they "lost it" or were "out of control." Many women at LAWC report that if the abuser gets angry in the grocery store, the abusive partner waits until they are home before abusing her. Also, women report that when the abusive partner smashes things in the home, it is usually something belonging to her, rather than the abuser. These are two examples that show the intentionality and decision making of abuse and not the escalation of anger and out of control behaviour.

MISCONCEPTION: *Can an incident of woman abuse be a minor, isolated incident?*

FACT: Woman abuse is rarely an isolated incident but rather a repeated pattern of tactics used to gain and maintain power and control over a woman. Woman abuse includes a wide range of coercive tactics that can include physical, sexual and emotional abuse as well as threats, intimidation, and use of the children. Abused women report that often the tactics of control increase in severity over time. Woman abuse causes serious and sometimes permanent injuries including death. Emotional abuse can also be as debilitating as physical abuse and as psychologically damaging as other types of abuse (World Bank, 1996).

MISCONCEPTION: *Do women provoke abuse in most cases?*

FACT: No one deserves to be abused. Provocation is an excuse that places responsibility and blame for violence on the victim rather than on the perpetrator. This misconception fails to hold abusers responsible and accountable for their own actions. It also clearly fails to protect the victim. LAWC clients identify that they often deliberately alter their own behaviours, choices or decisions, in order to avoid negative reprisals from their abusive partners.

MISCONCEPTION: *Are abusers sick or mentally ill?*

FACT: Woman abuse is too widespread to be explained by mental illness. It is a learned behaviour that is intentional. It is also observed and reinforced in society. Woman abuse is not caused by genetics or illness (Bandura, 1973; Dutton, 1988). The socially sanctioned belief that men have the right to control women in relationships and the right to use force to ensure that control is reinforced by society's major institutions such as, social, legal, religious, educational, mental health, medical, entertainment/media, and the family (Ganely 1989).

MISCONCEPTION: *Do drugs or alcohol cause abuse?*

FACT: While it is sometimes true that abusers may be under the influence of drugs or alcohol during abusive incidents and that these substances may contribute to the severity of the abuse,

drugs and alcohol do not cause the abuse (Rodgers, 1994). Abused women often say that their partner's are also abusive when sober. Stopping the substance abuse will not end the violence. Both issues must be addressed.

MISCONCEPTION: *Is woman abuse really spousal abuse? Both partners can be abusive.*

FACT: Some people suggest that woman abuse is really spousal abuse because both parties have been abusive. Careful assessment must be undertaken in these situations to determine who is the primary aggressor and who is the victim. Often this assessment will reveal that one person starts the violence while the victim's violence is used in self-defence. To help assess this situation, two good questions to ask are: "Who is afraid of the other?" And "Who changes their behaviour for fear of negative reprisals?"

MISCONCEPTION: *Does witnessing woman abuse harm children?*

FACT: Yes. Studies have shown that children often experience symptoms associated with witnessing woman abuse such as nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety and fear. Children who witness or who are exposed to woman abuse are also at greater risk for behavioural problems such as outbursts of anger and aggression and conflict with the law. In fact, the level of emotional and behavioural problems found in children who witness or are exposed to woman abuse is similar to that of children who are themselves directly physically abused (Hughes, 1988; Jaffe et al, 1985).