

Fact Sheet 6 Impacts of family and domestic violence on women¹

Family and domestic violence has short and long-term physical, emotional, psychological, financial and other effects on women. Every woman is different and the individual and cumulative impact of each act of violence depends on many complex factors.

While each woman will experience family and domestic violence uniquely, there are many common effects of living with violence and living in fear.

The obvious physical effects of family and domestic violence on women are physical injury and death. Yet there are also other effects on women's physical health – such as insomnia, chronic pain, physical exhaustion, and reproductive health problems – that are not necessarily the result of physical injuries. Women experiencing family and domestic violence have higher rates of miscarriage, most probably because pregnancy is often a time when violence begins or is exacerbated.

Women experiencing family and domestic violence are more likely to experience depression, panic attacks, phobias, anxiety and sleeping disorders. They have higher stress levels and are at greater risk of suicide attempts. They are at increased risk of misusing alcohol and other drugs, and of using minor tranquilisers and pain killers.

Women who experience family and domestic violence are often unable to act on their own choices because of physical restraint, fear and intimidation. Women who experience family and domestic violence live in persistent fear of further violation. They are frequently silenced and unable to express their point of view or experience. Women often make their partners' needs and feelings the constant focus of their attention as a survival strategy, which may result in an inability to attend to their own and their children's health and wellbeing.

Women who experience family and domestic violence often experience social isolation, including from their own extended family. Isolation can be a form of controlling behaviour or a consequence of women's stress, anxiety, shame, physical exhaustion, substance abuse, physical injuries and fear.

Seeing the effects of violence on their children can be profoundly distressing for women. They may feel or be unable to protect their children; this can have serious effects on their identity and confidence as mothers. Women's capacities to parent their children can be affected by the physical, emotional and cognitive effects of their own experiences of the violence, and by men's deliberate attempts to undermine their confidence and ability as mothers.

Women's resistance to the violence²

Although women experience a multitude of harmful effects from their partners' violence, they are not passive recipients of abuse and violence – they do not 'just go along with it' or 'let it happen'. Victims of family and domestic violence always try to reduce, prevent or stop the violence in some way. It is important for service providers to uncover the many ways in which women creatively and strategically resist the violence in an effort to escape the violence, retain their dignity and to make a better life for themselves and their children.

1 Adapted from: *Men's Behaviour Change group work: A manual for quality practice*, No to Violence, 2005.

2 Adapted from: *Honouring resistance: How women resist abuse in intimate relationships*, Weaver J, Todd N, Ogden C, & Craik L, 2007.

A victim's resistance to the violence may not make the violence stop. A victim's resistance may not be overt or visible. It is often dangerous for victims of family and domestic violence to openly resist the perpetrator. Victims may only resist the violence in their thoughts or through small acts that may go unnoticed. Therefore, to some the victim may appear 'passive'. A victim may resist the violence through overt acts and behaviour, such as 'hitting back', by not doing what the perpetrator wants her to do, or by numbing her feelings. These behaviours may then be labelled as 'dysfunctional' or the victim may be considered to be 'just as violent'.

The meanings of the behaviours used to resist the violence are unique to each woman, and are set in the context of her own experience and understanding of the violence.

Table 1: Victim's resistance to violence

What the perpetrator does	Examples of how a victim may show resistance
Tries to isolate the victim	Retains some relationships with others and remembers good times with family or friends.
Tries to humiliate the victim	Thinks or acts in ways that sustain her self-respect and dignity and not 'stooping' to the perpetrator's level of behaviour.
Tries to control the victim	Thinks or acts in ways that show she refuses to be controlled, for example, not doing what the perpetrator wants her to do, or doing it in a very exaggerated way.
Says that they are both responsible for the violence	Thinks or acts in ways that remind herself that he is solely responsible for his violence, for example, calling the police after a physical assault, or telling herself that he is choosing to use violence.
Makes excuses for the violence	Thinks or acts in ways that show herself that the violence is wrong or that there is no excuse for the violence, for example, writing down all of the acts of violence in a journal.
Tries to hide the violence	Thinks or acts in ways that expose the violence, for example, telling other people about his use of violence.

References

Department for Child Protection 2013, *Perpetrator accountability in Child Protection Practice – A resource for child protection workers about engaging and responding to men who perpetrate family and domestic violence*, Government of Western Australia, Perth.

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