

CHAPTER 14

Abuse, violence, and self-defense



Abuse can happen to any woman. Around the world, many women are treated badly by strangers and by people they know. They may be beaten, raped, shamed, sexually assaulted, hurt or abused in other ways, or even killed. Many times no one knows about the abuse because women feel ashamed or afraid to speak about it. They think no one will care or they are afraid they will be blamed for having caused the abuse.

Many women are treated badly because they have less power than the person abusing them, or because they are alone, weak or vulnerable. Disabled women and girls are even more likely to be abused, hurt, or sexually assaulted than non-disabled women. They are seen as even weaker and less important. A woman's disability **never** makes violence, abuse, or neglect OK. Women with disabilities deserve to live in safety, with people who care about them and treat them well.

A disabled woman or girl can be abused by men or women—by members of her family, by her husband or partner, by others in her household, or by her caregivers. She can be abused by a neighbor, a family friend, an employer, a co-worker, or a stranger.

If the abuser is someone the woman knows, she may feel she has no one else to turn to, especially if she relies on that person to help her with her daily activities. But when a woman keeps silent about abuse, she becomes more isolated and more vulnerable. Reaching out to someone she trusts can help a woman resist violence and get support.

Abuse and violence against any woman is never OK. Because disabled women often get little respect, they are sometimes seen as not worth protecting. This teaches people that abuse against disabled women is not a problem and that there is no need to respect their rights.

Harmful idea:



Disabled girls are lucky to have someone care for them—even if they have to bear some abuse.

The truth: A disabled girl has a right to be cared for just as other girls. No one is 'lucky' to experience abuse.

Harmful idea:



It doesn't matter if you abuse a disabled woman. Women with disabilities are stupid and are not worth listening to.

The truth: It is never OK to abuse a disabled woman. No one should ever be abused—especially a woman who has trouble learning. Abuse in any form—whether it is neglect, emotional abuse, not giving care, not allowing her to go to school, making decisions for a woman without consulting her, physical abuse or sexual violence—must be stopped.

Different kinds of abuse

When most people think of abuse, they usually imagine someone being violently assaulted—hurt, beaten, raped, sexually assaulted, or even killed. While women with disabilities are vulnerable to physical violence, they are also vulnerable to other forms of abuse.

For example, women who are dependent on someone assisting them with their daily care may be shamed; deprived of food, water, or medicine; left so long that they wet or soil themselves; or not be given the care they need. Some people may force women to exchange sexual favors for care. Some girls and women with disabilities are rarely allowed to meet other people or go out of the house. Others may be left alone, abandoned, or abused in other ways.

A disabled woman may suffer abuse from someone else who is also disabled. If a disabled man feels powerless and angry because of his disability, he may act out his anger by beating his partner as a way to assert his power over her.



Physical abuse—as well as other kinds of abuse and violence—can cause mental health problems. Women who have been abused often become afraid or sad, and sometimes they suffer from depression. When a woman is abused, her body needs to heal—and so do her mind and spirit.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Emotional abuse happens when someone insults a woman, threatens her, makes her feel frightened, abandons or isolates her, or treats her as though she is worthless. Some people abuse disabled women by saying they would be better off dead, or they are a burden and do not deserve to live.

Emotional abuse can also happen when someone:

- speaks badly about a deaf woman with people who are not deaf.
- calls her names or shouts at her for doing things differently.



Emotional abuse makes a woman weak

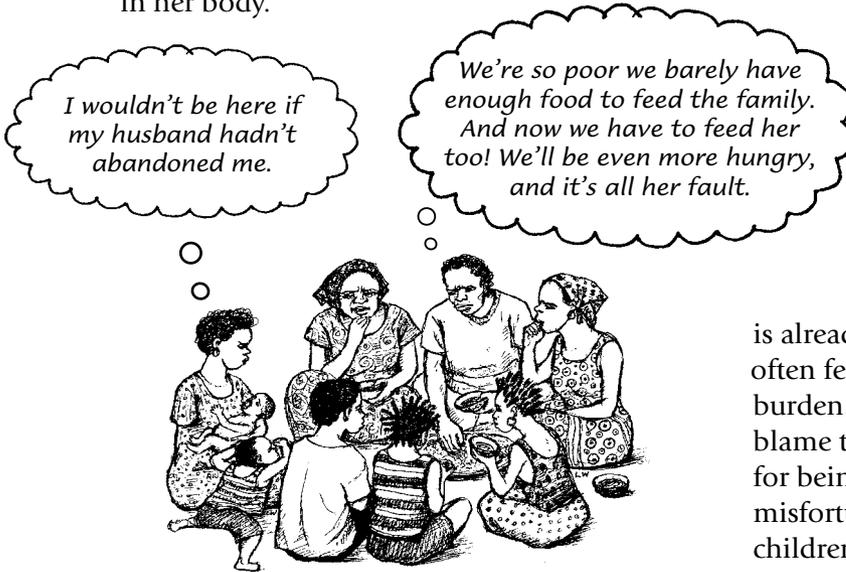
Emotional abuse makes it hard for a disabled woman to stay strong. A woman who is abandoned may feel as if she has lost her place and her role in society. It can be easy for her to feel sad and weak.

If a woman is always insulted or called names, she will start to feel stupid or sad. And if someone makes fun of her in front of her friends or neighbors, she may feel ashamed and be less likely to go out. After a while, the woman herself will believe she is not able to do anything worthwhile. A woman who is emotionally abused often suffers from mental health problems or depression. For more information, see Chapter 3 on Mental health.



ABANDONMENT

Sometimes people abandon or refuse to care for a disabled person. A family may abandon a disabled child if they are ashamed or if they think they will not be able to give the child the care she needs. A woman who becomes disabled may be abandoned by her husband or family because they are unable to accept the change in her body.



Many disabled women who are abandoned move in with relatives who may make her feel bad. When there is a lot of work to be done or if the family is already poor, disabled women often feel as though they are a burden. Sometimes relatives blame the disabled woman for being the 'cause' of their misfortune, especially if she has children.

ISOLATION

Keeping a disabled woman shut inside a room alone is one of the worst forms of abuse.

When a community does not respect or excludes people with disabilities, then some people are ashamed to have a disabled woman or girl in the family. They may try to keep other people from finding out about disabled women and girls in their families, or pretend they do not exist. Often, disabled women and girls are not allowed to get an education or participate in community events or religious services.



In some communities, disabled women are isolated because other people are afraid that being around them will make them disabled too. And some people believe if a pregnant woman touches a disabled woman, her baby will be born with a disability. None of this is true. You cannot catch a disability from someone else.

NEGLECT

Neglect happens when someone who should be caring for a disabled woman ignores her or does not help her. For example, if someone:

- does not give her food, or feeds her roughly.
- refuses to help her get medicine she may need.



- does not help her with the toilet.



Other examples of neglect are:

- leaving a disabled woman in bed for a long time.
- not helping her get dressed or wash herself.
- not helping her move or reposition her body to prevent pressure sores.
- not changing soiled sheets or wet clothes.

People also neglect disabled women by leaving them at home, or by denying them good education, proper food, or clothing.

Neglect can hurt a woman, as well as make her lonely and afraid. She can get pressure sores if she stays in bed too long or cannot move on her own. For information on preventing pressure sores, see page 116.

Physical abuse

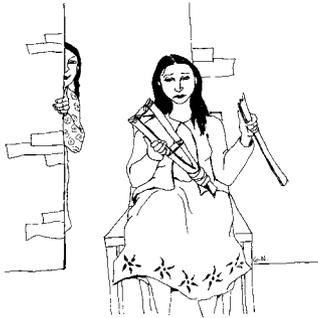
Physical abuse includes being beaten, pushed down, pinched, slapped, or hit. Sometimes people threaten a disabled woman's children. She may be even more afraid because she feels she cannot protect her children from violence.



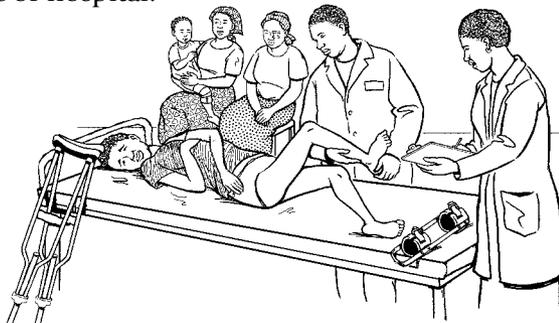
Women with disabilities can be physically abused and treated roughly in many different ways and places: in clinics, schools, residential homes, at their workplace, on public transportation, or even at home.

In addition to beatings and assault, a disabled woman is being physically abused when:

- someone deliberately breaks equipment she uses, such as her hearing aid, or her crutches.
- someone deliberately moves a blind woman's furniture to make it harder for her to get around.



- she is forced to be naked in front of strangers during an exam in a public clinic or hospital.



Health workers can prevent this kind of situation by covering her body as much as possible with her own clothes or a sheet. Or they can examine her in a private room, if one is available.

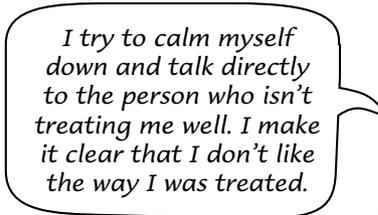
Preventing abuse

One of the ways women with disabilities can be safer from abuse is to become more involved in the community. Talking with others can help you find support.

- **Communicate with more than one person.** If at first other people find it hard to understand your speech, they will understand you better with practice. Drawing simple pictures can also help.
- **Talk about abuse with other women you trust.** It can be hard to explain what happened, and you may be ashamed or afraid that your abuser will find out. You may also worry that no one will believe you. Sometimes you might feel worse after you talk, especially if the person you are telling does not listen. But talking with someone is usually the best way to get help. For more information about support groups, see page 65.



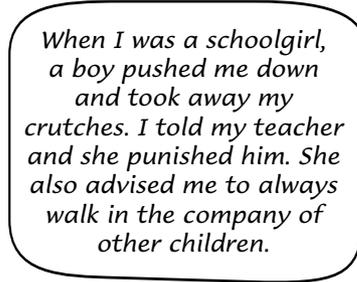
I talk to women elders I trust when I need assistance and support.



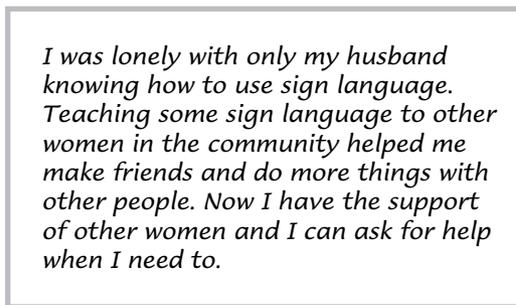
I try to calm myself down and talk directly to the person who isn't treating me well. I make it clear that I don't like the way I was treated.



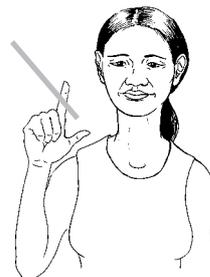
People say things like, "This girl is worthless." To get rid of the feeling of worthlessness, I discovered I could do things with my hands. Knowing my own skills helped take away some of the pain of the verbal abuse.



When I was a schoolgirl, a boy pushed me down and took away my crutches. I told my teacher and she punished him. She also advised me to always walk in the company of other children.



I was lonely with only my husband knowing how to use sign language. Teaching some sign language to other women in the community helped me make friends and do more things with other people. Now I have the support of other women and I can ask for help when I need to.





Women with different abilities can exchange or trade work if they each do something they are good at.

- **Do your work with other women.** People are less likely to threaten you or treat you badly where other people can see. If you are hurt in a public place, other women may be too scared or ashamed to do anything. But you might be able to get help from these women later.
- **Reach out for support** from other women and with community groups if you or someone you know has been abused.
- **Talk with a health worker** if you have been physically hurt.

Abusers often break down a woman's self-esteem, making her believe she (and her children) will be unable to survive without the abuser. Remember, you can survive without the abuser.

See page 308 for ways you can defend yourself against violence.

My husband always said he had done me a favor by marrying me. Since my family was poor, he accused me of marrying him for his wealth. He told me I would never be able to get another partner, and he abused me. After consulting women lawyers and talking with my husband's relatives, I decided to leave him.



A woman in my community was physically abused by her husband after she gave birth to a disabled girl. Eventually, she made the decision to go back to her parents' house and get out of the marriage.

For my friend, the abuse started when she became disabled. Her husband refused to help her and started sleeping with other women. My friend went back to her family, where she received love and good care. Her condition improved and she became healthier and happier.

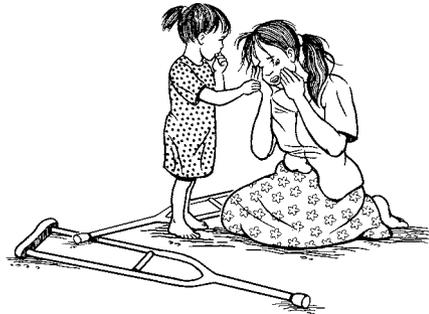


Support for women leaving violent partners

Because women have organized to be safe from abuse, in many places laws and courts have been established to protect us against violence. In other places, the people who are supposed to enforce the laws, especially the police, lawyers, and judges, cannot be trusted to help a woman. But in all communities, women are best protected when they work together. Here is an example:



If your partner has been beating you...



...and you decide you want to leave him...



...talk about it with someone you trust (a neighbor, a friend, or a relative).



Then try to get together with other women in the community to talk about your problems. You will probably find that some of them have the same problems.



Then you can all go together and talk to the man. If he does not say he will change his ways, go together to a village elder...



...or to the police and report him. They will be more likely to take your complaint seriously if you are with a group.

Sexual abuse

Girls are especially at risk for sexual abuse because they are smaller, weaker, and less aware of the social rules and practices around sex in their communities. Girls may be abused by a father or mother, an uncle or other relative, or by a brother or by other children. If a girl tells someone about abuse in the family, the family often protects the abuser—and blames the girl. But it is never right to blame the person who has been abused, especially not a child.

Girls and women with disabilities are at even greater risk for being abused—especially if they are weakened by their disabilities, have difficulty communicating, or are not fully accepted by their communities. This can make the abusers believe women with disabilities are easy targets and their communities will not care about what happens to them.

A disabled woman can be sexually abused by her husband, by other family members, by someone who takes care of her, or by a stranger. Most often, a woman is raped by a man she knows. And because a disabled woman's family may not have allowed her to be in social situations where she could make friends and learn about sexual relationships between men and women, she may think she has no other choice but to accept abuse. She may even think that no one but the abuser will be attracted to her.

There are many ways sexual abuse happens, but only sometimes do people think of them as sexual assault or rape. Sexual abuse means any sexual contact a woman does not want. A woman or girl is sexually abused when she:

- has been raped or forced to have sex she does not want.
- is touched on her breasts or genitals, or on other parts of her body, without her permission.
- is forced to have sex with someone so she can keep her job, or with a teacher so she can get a passing grade.
- is forced to have sex in exchange for care.
- has sex in exchange for money or food, because she has no other way to support herself.
- has to pose for sex pictures (pornography) in exchange for money, food, or care.
- has to hear or watch sex between other people.
- is teased or talked to sexually, or has to listen to jokes or sexual language that make her uncomfortable.
- is made to look at pornography.

Sexual abuse can happen to any girl or woman. It is never her fault.

Talk about sexual abuse with women who have problems with learning or understanding

All children are taught to obey adults. As they grow older, they learn when not to obey. But women who have learning difficulties have often only been taught to trust other people, to be 'good' by being quiet, not arguing, and by doing what they are told. This can make them easy targets for people who may try to take advantage of them, including sexually.



Talk about sexual abuse with girls and women who have problems learning and help them understand they have a right to be safe from abuse. Make sure they know they can talk to you or someone they trust if they are being touched or abused, and that they will be believed and kept safe.

Also, make sure women who have learning difficulties learn how to defend themselves.

Sexual assault and rape

Sexual assault means forcing a woman to have sexual contact she does not want. Rape is the most violent form of sexual assault. Rape happens any time a man puts his penis, finger, or any object into a woman's vagina, anus, or mouth without her consent.

Sexual assault and rape of girls

Sexual assault and rape is extremely harmful to anyone. But the effect it has on girls can be especially hard and long-lasting. Because girls are not sexually mature and may not understand exactly how to explain what was done to them, they often have a difficult time getting anyone to believe them. In some communities, a girl who has been raped will never be 'acceptable' to marry.

In places where there is a strong military presence, girls are sometimes forced to be servants or 'sex slaves' for soldiers or armed groups. These girls are often disabled physically and emotionally as a result.

In some places, people believe that having sex with a virgin will cure AIDS, and many very young girls, and even babies, have been raped because of this belief. Because their bodies are small, their genitals get badly damaged and they are more easily infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Getting help if you are raped or assaulted

Every woman's experience with rape is different. But there are some things you can do to help yourself recover. First, ask yourself these questions:

- Who can you ask for help?
- Do you want to tell the police about the rape?
- Where can you go for medical care?
- Do you want to try to punish the rapist?

A disabled woman who is raped needs the same help as any other woman. It is important to tell someone you trust who can go with you to see a health worker, and help you decide if you want to tell the police. You may feel sad, hurt, scared or angry for a long time, so you will also need someone to talk with about your feelings. Choose someone who cares about you, is strong and dependable, and who you trust will not tell others. Your family or usual helpers may be too upset to be able to give you all the support you need.

The stigma of rape

In some places, a woman who has been raped is treated as if she has brought shame or disgrace to her family or the whole community. She is unfairly blamed not only for the attack on her, but for the moral failing of the entire community. This is called stigma. Because of stigma, a woman who was raped may be afraid to tell other people. She may fear her community will treat her differently if they know about the rape. Or, a woman's family may not want anyone to know because they think it will dishonor the family. The stigma can be worse for a disabled woman, because it usually adds to the stigma that people already direct toward others who are disabled or have disabled people in the family.

A woman who has been raped is **never** to blame for the rape. A woman who has been raped needs support from her family and her community. Stigma is a barrier to a woman healing and a community preventing sexual assault in the future.



If you speak differently, you may find it hard to explain what happened, especially if you are upset. If you are ashamed or frightened, the words may be harder for you to say. Sometimes it helps to draw a picture to explain what happened.

If you are deaf

Women who are deaf or have trouble speaking can have a harder time getting help if they are raped or abused. Even though she may be able to describe her attacker, if no one understands her sign language, she will have a difficult time explaining to others what happened to her and who did it.



When I went to the police because my husband was beating me, they did not understand my sign language and they were impatient with me. My co-wife defended my husband, and no one believed me.

If someone you know has been raped or abused

If you are talking with a woman who has been abused or raped, reassure her that you will listen to her. Tell her to take as much time as she needs to explain what happened.

- Reassure her that it is not her fault.
- Be supportive. Listen to her feelings, help her decide what she needs, and reassure her she can go on with her life.
- Respect her wishes for privacy and safety. Do not tell anyone unless she wants you to.
- Go with her to see a health worker, to report the rape or abuse to the police, to talk with someone trained to listen and support her, to see a lawyer, and to go to court if she wants to do those things.
- Do not protect the rapist if you know him. If possible, let other women know about the man. He is a danger to every woman in the community.

*I believe you.
It's not your fault.
I will help you.*



If you go to the police

In most places, rape is a crime. But it may take a long time and be very difficult to prove you were raped. Make your decision to go to the police carefully. Have the police helped other women in your community who have been raped? If you want the rape to remain private, will the police keep others from learning about it?

Never go to the police alone. In some communities, a woman who goes to the police alone is at risk for being raped again by the police. Be sure someone else can go with you.

If you want to report the rape to the police, you must go as soon as possible. Do not wash, shower, or bathe before you go, and do not change the clothes you were wearing. This can help prove you were raped. The police may ask you to have a medical exam from a doctor who works with the police. The exam can also help prove you were raped.



If the rapist is arrested, you will have to identify him in front of the police or in front of a judge in court. Going to court for a rape is never easy. Describing what happened may make you have the feelings of being raped all over again. Not everyone will understand. Some may try to blame you or say you were lying.

And some people will not listen to you because of your disability. They may believe a disabled woman cannot be a truthful or convincing witness. But some women with disabilities have been successful in court, especially when they have support from their community. When you decide to go to court, make sure you always go with someone you trust.

HEALTH PROBLEMS CAUSED BY RAPE

After a rape, it is best to see a health worker, even if you are not badly hurt. Tell the health worker you have been raped. She can help prevent and treat common health problems caused by rape.

Pregnancy

You can prevent pregnancy if you act quickly and use emergency family planning. Speak with a health worker about this. Use emergency family planning as soon as possible after the rape, but no later than 5 days (120 hours). See page 357.

Even if you use emergency contraception, if you do not get your next monthly bleeding on time, have an exam right away to make sure you are not pregnant. If you think you are pregnant, see a health worker. In some countries, abortion is legal if a girl or woman has been raped.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS

The man who raped you may have had a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or HIV/AIDS and passed it to you. A health worker can give you medicines to prevent STIs such as gonorrhea, syphilis, and chlamydia even if you do not think you were infected. It is better to prevent an STI than to wait for signs of infection.

You should also try to have an HIV test in 2 to 4 weeks (see page 172). Until you have a negative test result, it is best to use condoms if you have sex to protect your partner from possible infection. If you live in an area where many people have HIV/AIDS, you may want to talk with a health worker about taking medicines to reduce your risk of becoming infected.

Tears and cuts

Rape can damage the genitals by causing tears and cuts. These can cause pain, but will go away in time. If there is a lot of bleeding, see a health worker who can stitch tears and give you medicine to prevent infection. For small cuts and tears:

- Soak your genitals 3 times each day in warm water that has been boiled and cooled. You can put chamomile flowers in the boiling water to help with healing. Or you can put the liquid from inside the leaves of an aloe plant on the cuts and tears.
- Pour water over your genitals when you pass urine so it will not burn. Drinking a lot of liquid makes the urine burn less.
- Watch for signs of infection: heat, yellow liquid (pus), a bad smell, and pain that gets worse.



Bladder or kidney infections

After violent sex, it is common for a woman to have a bladder or kidney infection. If you have pain when you pass urine, or if there is blood in your urine, see a health worker. You may need to take medicine. It helps to drink a lot of water, at least 8 glasses a day (see pages 105 to 106).

To the health worker:

If you see someone who has been raped or abused:

Treat her with kindness and understanding. Encourage her to tell you what happened, listen carefully, and let her know you believe her. Do not blame her. She may find it difficult for you to see or touch her. So before you touch her, explain how you will examine her and wait until she is ready. Remember that her feelings about the rape and violence may last for a long time, even years.



Treat her health problems. Give her medicines to prevent STIs and pregnancy, and to lower her risk for getting HIV/AIDS. If she became pregnant because of the rape, help her to decide what to do.

Write down who raped her and exactly what happened. If your clinic does not keep records, make one and keep it somewhere safe. Draw a picture of the front and back of her body and mark the places where she has been hurt. Show or tell her what you have written and explain that it can be used to support the fact she was raped if she reports the rape to the police or brings legal charges against the rapist.

Treat her emotional and mental health needs. Ask her whether she has someone to talk to. Help her to respect herself again and to gain control of her life.

Help her to make her own decisions. If she wants to report the rape to the police, help her find legal services. Help her find other services in the community for women who have been raped.

Help her tell her partner or her family. If they do not know already, offer to help her tell them. You can help them find ways to support her until she recovers. Remember that family members usually also need help to overcome their feelings about the rape.



If you are a health worker, always ask permission before you examine a girl or woman with a disability who has been raped or abused. This will help her feel she has control over who touches her.

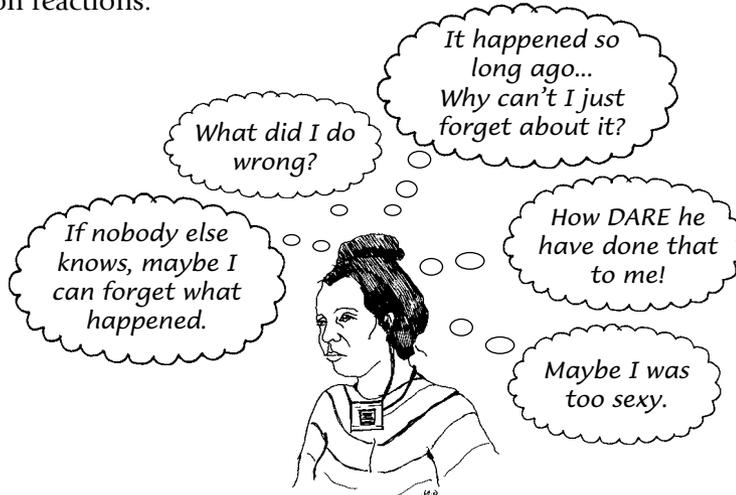
SEXUAL RELATIONS AFTER RAPE

You can have normal sexual relations after rape. You will need to wait until your genitals no longer hurt and any tears have healed. For many women, having sex makes them think about the rape. If this happens to you, talk with your partner about why sex no longer feels the same, why it frightens you, and why you need to wait. Ask your partner to help you overcome your fear by gentle hugging and caressing that avoids touching your genitals. As you feel safer, you may be able to start having sexual intercourse again. But this takes time, and you will both need to be patient.

A woman's partner can make a big difference in helping a woman who has been raped, by being kind and understanding. But sometimes a woman's partner may reject her after she has been raped. He may be ashamed and angry, especially if he believes that her rape dishonors him or if the community holds that belief. It may help to find someone in the community he can talk with about his feelings.

HOW YOU FEEL AFTER THE RAPE

The rape may still bother you long after your body has healed. Here are some common reactions:



It is important for a woman who has been raped to talk to someone, or to do things that will help her feel better after the rape. Every woman finds her own way to heal. Some women perform a ritual. Others try to punish the rapist, or work to prevent other women from being raped. Whatever you do, be patient with yourself and ask others to be patient, too. For more information, see Chapter 3, Mental health.

Abuse in institutions

Sometimes when a family finds it hard to care for a disabled woman, they decide to place her in an institution or a residential home. They feel the institution will be able to care for their daughter or mother better than they themselves can. Many people who live in institutions or residential homes also get a feeling of belonging and have a community of people around them. Even though many people with disabilities have survived because of the care they get in residential schools, hospitals, and orphanages, they can also be abused there.

Because people who live in institutions are often isolated, lonely, and powerless, they are more vulnerable to being abused. Many times they are living far away from their families, or they have no families at home who can care for them.

Disabled people in institutions often have little control over their own lives. They are usually told what to do, and cannot make many decisions on their own. Women who have learning difficulties may be particularly isolated in institutions because of their difficulties in understanding or making themselves understood.



Other problems for people in institutions result from the way the institution is managed. Many institutions have too many residents and not enough money. Often, the people who work there are overworked, frustrated, and exhausted. Sometimes the people who work in institutions are given too much power: they make rules, provide the care, and are expected to keep order.

In addition to the kinds of abuse mentioned earlier, women with disabilities can face other kinds of abuse and violence in institutions:

- forced sex with workers, caretakers, or other residents
- being beaten, slapped, or hurt
- no activity for work or pleasure, and always being bored
- forced sterilization or abortions
- being locked in a room alone
- ice baths or cold showers as punishment
- forced medication (tranquilizers)
- having to undress or be naked in front of other people
- watching other people be abused or hurt
- being tied down or put in restraints (unable to move)

People who work in institutions

Many people who work in institutions that care for women with disabilities have good intentions. But some people who work in institutions may treat people with disabilities badly. These people like having power over others. Other people who work in institutions may get upset at how women with disabilities are treated in the institution and may want to do things differently. These caregivers usually work long hours with low pay. They are usually expected to do what they are told, and they rarely have the power to change the conditions in which they work.

Sometimes caregivers do not say anything because they do not know who to tell. Or they are afraid of losing their jobs. If caregivers complain about abuse they might be told it is not their problem, or they may be threatened or laughed at. Many times the caregivers end up believing that bad care is just how things are.



I'd like to spend more time with the patients, but I wouldn't be able to get all my work done. And if I don't, I'll lose my job!

The people in charge of the institution may not know about the abuse, or if they know, they may pretend nothing is happening, or they may say that violence against disabled people does not matter.

Bad conditions and the abuse of people with disabilities in institutions are issues for the whole community. People in institutions need enough resources for good care and to make sure they are not abused.

WORKING TO CHANGE INSTITUTIONS

If you know someone who has been sent to live in an institution, and you think the person is not being treated well, here are some ideas to work for change:

- Form a parent's or family group, and speak with the people in charge. They will be more likely to pay attention if you go as a group than if you go alone.
- Build community involvement with the institution and residents by offering residents opportunities for meaningful activity and interaction with the community outside.
- Campaign for visiting hours and conditions that allow residents to go out with a visitor, or spend time privately with people who come to visit.
- Advocate for community programs and stay-at-home services, so that people do not have to go to institutions.

What you can do to be safer from violence

SELF-DEFENSE

Having a disability does not mean you have to accept that you are weak and must always depend on others. You can learn to defend yourself against the many ways you may face abuse, violence or sexual assault.

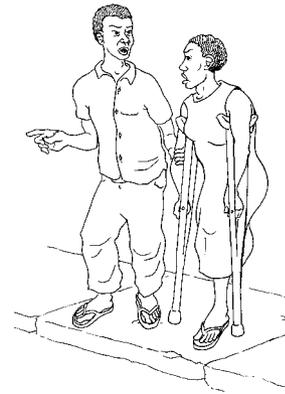
You can begin by preventing people from giving you 'help' you don't want or need. This is one way you can show people your strength and your ability to speak for yourself and make your own decisions. Although the person offering "help" may not be trying to harm you, do not be afraid to tell them to stop, even if they seem annoyed. If there are other people nearby, speak loud enough so they can hear you too. Practice being firm but not necessarily rude to people who may offer you genuine but unwanted help.

When men believe they are free to touch you, they may think they can easily take even more advantage of you. If someone touches you without your permission, say the following 3 things to the person:

1. "You are touching me."
2. "I don't like that."
3. "Take your hands off me."

If the person holds your arm, or starts pushing your wheelchair, say firmly and loudly:

"You are pushing my chair."
"Don't push my chair."
"I don't want you to do that."



"You are holding my arm."
"Don't hold my arm."



Never believe you are alone. You are part of a world-wide movement of women and men who are working to end violence against women.

If someone is coming toward you and you think they may hurt you, try this:



Many times this action is enough to make the person go away. He will think you will be too much trouble to try to take advantage of. If he keeps coming closer, scream for help.

Attackers usually pick people who look easy to hurt. And a disabled woman, no matter what disability she has, can look especially easy, particularly if she looks as though she is lost or does not know where she is. So acting in an assertive way with a lot of self-confidence is just as important as knowing what to do physically. Being assertive is often a woman's best protection. When a woman is assertive, she moves, speaks, and acts as if she has a right to be wherever she is. She acts confidently and carries herself like a strong, proud woman. For information on self-esteem, see pages 62 to 65.



This woman looks confident and assertive.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE ATTACKED

If a woman resists someone who tries to hurt her, she is often able to avoid rape. Some people think that trying to stop rape will make an attacker more angry. But an attacker is already dangerous. Resisting rape may allow you to get away, because it can show an attacker that trying to rape you will be too much trouble.

It is impossible to know how you will react if someone tries to rape you. Some women are filled with anger and feel strength they did not know they had. Others feel like they cannot move. But remember, if you are raped, it is not because you failed to defend yourself. Rape is **never** your fault.

If someone attacks you or tries to rape you, do whatever you can to get away:

- Do something he finds disgusting, such as drool or spit.
- Hurt the soft parts of his body such as his eyes, nose, or testicles (balls) by scratching, hitting, or kicking him.
- Roll your wheelchair into the person as hard and fast as you can.

Make noise, scream, or yell "NO!"
Shout as loud as you can: "HELP!"



Throw chili powder, pepper, or dirt into his eyes. It will blind him for a while and be very painful. You may be able to get away.



If you lose your balance easily, it is best to sit down before you start defending yourself or fighting back.



When your attacker bends down, hit him in the nose or eyes. You can also use your head to hit his nose.



Sitting or kneeling down is a safer defense position for women who use crutches, whose legs are weak, or who are unsteady on their feet. Once you are sitting down, poke him with your crutch or cane.

If you use a stick or cane, you may be disoriented if it is knocked away. If you think you are about to be attacked, turn your stick so the short, thick end points toward the man. Poke him with the stick as hard as you can. Do not swing your stick like a baseball or cricket bat. That makes it easier to grab or to knock away.

It is better to poke someone with the short end of your stick than to swing the long end.



If you use crutches, use them as a weapon to hit him.



If you are blind

Blind women can lose their bearings when someone attacks them. But you can use the attacker's body to help you. Try to find the place where the shoulder meets the neck. It is one of the easiest places to find quickly and it gives you good information about the position of the rest of his body. Then you can hit him in his soft spots.

Ask a friend to help you practice finding the shoulder quickly, and then finding the tender parts of the body. Your friend can also help you practice finding a cane that is knocked away.



Lift your knee, and push it as hard and fast as you can into his testicles (balls).

Practice your skills

Practicing self-defense can help you feel safer and more confident, even if you are never assaulted. Practice having a strong, assertive attitude. Think about different ways to defend yourself and try them with other women.

Remember, even if you cannot defend yourself, it is not your fault if you are attacked or raped.



You can organize a group so you can all learn together. In some self-defense classes, women practice hitting as hard as they can. They can hit a dummy or another woman padded with extra clothes or pillows. This is very useful for women who are not used to fighting.

FAMILIES AND CAREGIVERS CAN PREVENT ABUSE

Girls and women who grow up with disabilities are regularly touched, examined, and moved around by family members, helpers, and health workers. Often this happens without asking permission. Any woman, whether or not she has a disability, has the right to say who can touch her.

Families and caregivers can work to prevent sexual abuse by helping a girl learn the difference between 'good touch' and 'bad touch.' Always ask for permission before touching her. If she needs help with personal care and daily activities, always allow her to tell you what she wants you to do. Let her tell you how to touch or move her body in ways that are more comfortable. Teach disabled girls to say 'NO' to touches they do not like.

Talk to disabled girls about rape and sexual abuse, and make sure they learn to defend themselves.

When you raise a disabled child with love and respect, she will grow up into a confident, assertive woman and other people will be less likely to treat her badly.

A woman's body should always be treated with respect.



COMMUNITIES CAN PREVENT VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

When a community believes that abuse is a terrible thing, it is rare for a woman to be abused. When disabled women are important members of the community, few disabled women are abused. But in places where communities believe that disabled women are not worth much, many more women with disabilities are abused.

Provide help for women who have been abused, especially women with disabilities. Rape crisis centers, emergency homes, shelters, and other programs against abuse and violence can include special programs to help women with disabilities. Make sure the buildings are accessible and that appropriate information is available for blind and deaf women, and for women with learning difficulties.

Health centers, schools, counseling centers, churches or elders in the community can help care for the mental health of people who have suffered abuse. Counseling can help people who have been abused regain their confidence, self-esteem, and well-being.

Educate and involve men in discussions about why abuse is wrong. Make sure the police and other community officials understand it is never OK to abuse disabled women. Employ people who know the local sign language in all community services, such as police stations, clinics, and hospitals.

Learn about the laws in your country that protect women who have been abused and explain them to others. Arrange public meetings of women, including women with disabilities, to discuss and protest violence and abuse against women. When women with disabilities, health workers, and others in the community talk openly about these problems and work to end violence, it makes all women safer from abuse.



Recruit women to be police officers and give them special training in helping women who have been abused.



A woman should be trusted if she says she was abused. She should be supported, no matter who she is.

Abuse is not just a family matter. Abuse is a social and community health problem.

