

Long Term Effects of Abuse and Trauma

- The American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Revised* (DSM-IV-R) defines a "traumatic event" as one in which a person experiences, witnesses, or is confronted with actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others. A person's response to trauma often includes intense fear, helplessness, or horror.¹
- Histories of physical and sexual abuse are commonplace among incarcerated women. Women's violent offences tend to be reactive in nature. As a result, violent crimes are more often committed against intimates, not strangers.
- Of the 68 women serving a life sentence for murdering their intimate partners, the majority had been abused by their partners prior to their use of lethal force.²
- Child sexual abuse has come to be widely regarded as a cause of mental health issues in adult life. There is also a considerable overlap between physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and children who are subject to one form of abuse are significantly more likely to have experienced other forms of abuse.³
- Between 51% and 98% of public mental health clients diagnosed with severe mental illness have trauma histories,⁴ and prevalence rates within substance abuse treatment programs and other social services are similar. In children, trauma may be incorrectly diagnosed as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, separation anxiety disorder, and reactive attachment disorder.⁵
- A random community sample found women who reported histories of childhood sexual abuse were more likely to have work histories that placed them in the lowest socio-economic status categories.
- Abuse in the home can drive women and girls into the streets, and lack of housing puts them at further serious risk of physical and sexual violence and early death. One study found that 87% of homeless girls and women aged 12 to 19 in British Columbia had been abused.⁶

¹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, Revised* (DSM IV-R) 4th ed. Washington, DC: APA, 2000).

² Lise Addario, *Six Degrees from Liberation: Legal Needs of Women in Criminal and Other Matters* (Research and Statistics Report) (Ottawa: Department of Justice, 2002).

³ Paul Mullen & Jillian Fleming, "Long-term Effects of Child Sexual Abuse" (1998) 9 *Issues in Child Abuse Prevention*.

⁴ Mueser Goodman *et al.*, "Trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder in severe mental illness" (1998) 66 *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, at 493.

⁵ Center for Substance Abuse Treatment. Substance abuse treatment for persons with child abuse and neglect issues Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) series. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2000).

⁶ Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, "New Federal Policies Affecting Women's Equality: Reality Check" (2006) 8 Factsheet.

- Typical post traumatic responses to sexual victimization such as flashbacks, dissociation, addictions and inability to trust, if interpreted in isolation from the abuse, can easily be treated as merely symptoms of psychiatric conditions.⁷
- From the 1800s to the early 1980s, Aboriginal children were often forcibly separated from their families and sent to residential schools where many were physically and sexually abused; too many were also beaten for speaking their own language or practicing their spiritual traditions. The result is generations who did not learn parenting skills from their own parents or communities. The effects of loss of control over your political, legal, linguistic, religious, family, and economic systems cannot be underestimated. A recent study showed that Aboriginal teen suicides were highest in communities where people experienced the least control over their own management; it was lowest in communities with self-government.⁸
- It is estimated that only about 10% of sexual assaults on women are reported to the police. One reason for this is that sexual assaults often occur in contexts in which the abuser is in a position of trust or authority in relation to the person assaulted.⁹ This could be a husband, father, other relative, doctor, coach, religious advisor, teacher, friend, employer, or date. The majority of sexual assaults are committed by a man known to the victim who is likely to use verbal pressure, tricks and/or threats during an assault.¹⁰ Two-thirds of sexual assaults occur in a private home.¹¹
- Research repeatedly shows that a vast majority of Aboriginal women have been assaulted, and that the chance of an Aboriginal child growing up without a single first-hand experience of abuse or alcoholism is extremely limited. Violence may have started in residential school or at the hands of parents who were in residential school and experienced rape, physical abuse, and cultural genocide.
- Violence too often continues into adulthood: 48% to up to 90% of Aboriginal women report being assaulted at the hands of their partners. Aboriginal women also experience racially-motivated attacks and are harassed on the streets by the public and police at a far higher rate than non-Aboriginal women.¹²
- A woman may have grown up watching her mother being beaten, and receiving the message that violence is just a part of relationships. Those who witness their fathers committing violence against their mothers are at increased risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of violence against women as adults.¹³
- Children who witness violence against their mothers are significantly more likely to

⁷ Temi Firsten, *An Exploration of the Role of Physical and Sexual Abuse for Psychiatrically Institutionalized Women* (Toronto: Ontario Women's Directorate, 1990).

⁸ Marika Morris, "Women, Health and Action" (2001) CRIAW Factsheet.

⁹ Jane Doe, "The Story of Jane Doe" (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2004).

¹⁰ *Dispelling the Myths about Sexual Assault* (Toronto: Ontario Women's Directorate, 1998).

¹¹ Statistics Canada, *Sex Offenders*, The Daily, March 29, 1999.

¹² Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, *Changing the Landscape: Ending Violence - Achieving Equality* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1993).

¹³ Marika Morris, "Violence Against Women and Girls" (2002) CRIAW Factsheet.

develop aggressive behaviour, emotional disturbances (depression, continual fear, and anxiety), criminal activity (destroying property, theft and vandalism) and experience negative effects on social and academic development. The majority of prisoners serving 2 or more years who also have a history of violence against family members, witnessed violence as children.¹⁴

- Most abused women use active strategies to maximize their safety and that of their children. Some resist the abuse and fight back, some flee, others try to keep the peace by capitulating to their partner's demands. What may seem to be a lack of response to abuse may in fact be a strategic assessment of ensuring her own and her children's survival.¹⁵
- Physical and sexual abuse of girls and women is said to cost the Canadian taxpayers \$4.2 billion dollars each year. Your taxes go into cleaning up the mess that abusers leave behind.¹⁶
- Over a quarter of Canadian women have been assaulted at least once by an intimate partner. In Canada, four out of five people murdered by their spouses are women murdered by men. Girl children are targets of abuse within the family more so than boys. Four out of five victims (79%) of family-related sexual assaults are girls.¹⁷
- Some women and girls are more vulnerable to physical and sexual attacks. 40% of women with disabilities have been raped, abused or assaulted. Over half of Aboriginal women have been assaulted. Aboriginal and other racialized women are also subject to racially-motivated physical and sexual assaults in addition to domestic violence.¹⁸
- Federally sentenced women have high rates of childhood sexual abuse, commonly incestuous, violent, extended over a long period of time, and with multiple perpetrators. They also have high rates of re-victimization at the hands of violent men. As a result, the mere presence of men doing their bed checks, being forced to speak to male staff about their abuse and related triggers, being monitored by male staff and being strip searched, especially when male staff may be present, also serves to re-victimize women in prison.
- Despite these numbers and women's lived reality, there are very few programs or counseling services available to women prisoners that deal with sexual or physical abuse.
- Women in Canadian prisons have experienced ongoing human rights abuses. In 1994, the stripping and shackling of women by men on the institutional emergency response

¹⁴ Statistics Canada, *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2002)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Sheri Gibbings, "Women, peace and security" (2002) CRIAW Factsheet.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

team from the Kingston Penitentiary and the later nine-month illegal segregation of women are two internationally publicized examples.¹⁹

- Refugee women who have experienced sexual and physical violence in refugee camps and then come to Canada, are often met with little sympathy or understanding. Many of these women face Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as a result of their experiences of war, persecution and sexual and physical abuse.²⁰
- Women refugees can come to Canada for similar reasons as men: fleeing political persecution or war in their own countries. In addition, some women may have been the victims of sexual torture and must now face that trauma and fear as well as the confusion and uncertainty associated with settling into a new country and culture.
- In the past, Canada did not recognize that women could be targets of gender-specific forms of persecution, such as rape, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced marriage or mutilation. For example, in a case that was overturned by the Federal Court of Appeal, a Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) judge ruled against a woman from China because the judge said China's one child policy which requires women to abort any further pregnancies is not a matter of persecution of women or an infringement of rights, but a matter of "economic logic".²¹

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¹⁹ Kim Pate, "50 Years of Canada's International Commitment to Human Rights: Milestones in Correcting Corrections for Federally Sentenced Women" (2000) In *Eradicating Poverty and Violence in the 21st Century, Canadian Women Studies*, 20 (3) at 44.

²⁰ Sheri Gibbings, "Women, peace and security" (2002) CRIAW Factsheet.

²¹ Marika Morris, "Immigrant and Refugee Women" (2002) CRIAW Factsheet.

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