

Myths & Realities

Domestic Violence - the mental, physical &/or sexual abuse of women by men they have or have been, in a relationship with - is surrounded by myths & prejudices. Most of these blame the woman, for being abused, for staying with the abused. At best, they are unhelpful. At worst, they put women's & children's lives at risk. These myths are common throughout society, in the media, in the police, sheriffs & judges, in doctors nurses, in teachers, social workers, housing workers, in workplaces, in families. So women who are being abused, who are considering what their options are & trying to decide what they want to do, are confronted at nearly every turn by these myths & prejudices. This leaflet contrasts reality with some of the most commonly held myths. But there is one point which overrides all the others - women are NEVER to blame for being abused. The use of violence, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, is a CHOICE men make to exercise power & control over their partners.

MYTH *"It was a one-off. He's really sorry, and it won't happen again".*

REALITY Once a man has started to abuse his partner, it is likely to happen again. It is rarely an isolated incident, usually it is part of a pattern of controlling behaviour, which may not have been recognised as such e.g. telling her what to wear, who to see, being very possessive and jealous. Men often say they are sorry afterwards, make promises and say they'll never do it again. Often women who have left return to violent partners because of these promises, and there maybe a 'honeymoon' period when he appears to be the perfect partner. However, most abusers will abuse again, maybe in a different form, and women should be wary of their promises.

MYTH *"Women should stay for the sake of the children - they need a dad"*

REALITY Children who experience domestic violence suffer emotionally and some may also be physically or sexually abused. Many women leave when they see the effects on their children of their partner's abuse. Children's emotional and physical health tends to improve when they come into refuges. Children need love and security, which they can get from their mother, more than they need a 'father figure', especially one whom they know to be abusive to their mother. Some children of abused women do, however, have a good relationship with their father, and want to continue to see him. Access visits can be arranged for this to happen. Women and children have a right to a life free from violence, for the sake of both the women & children.

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MYTH *"She must deserve it or provoke it"*

REALITY There is no justification for using violence, unless your life is in danger. No-one deserves to be abused, and there is always an alternative, no matter how angry you are.

MYTH *"She must enjoy it, otherwise she'd leave."*

REALITY Women stay with abusive men for many reasons, but not because they enjoy being abused. They may not know they are entitled to permanent re-housing if they leave home because of violence, and think they would be homeless. They may not know they are entitled to Income Support for themselves and their children, and think they would be penniless. They may fear they would lose their children if they 'desert' their partners. They may not know Women's Aid can provide safe, secret refuge, and fear that they would be found wherever they try to go. They may feel the abuse is their fault, and that they do not deserve a life free from violence. Or they may have been told by their partner that he will find them & kill them if they try to leave. None of these any have anything to do with enjoying being abused.

MYTH *"It's just the odd domestic tiff. Everybody has arguments"*

REALITY The difference between the occasional argument, which all couples have, and domestic violence is that the latter is quite deliberate behaviour which is used by men to exert power and control over their women partners. A range of different types of controlling behaviours are used, from depriving her of money or sleep, criticising her appearance, telling her who she can be friendly with, locking her in the house, hitting her, pulling her hair, hitting her with weapons, raping her, threatening to kill her & her children.

MYTH *"It's all caused by drink"*

REALITY Some men only abuse their partners when they have been drinking, but some only do it when they are sober, & some do it drunk or sober. Drink can provide an easy excuse, but it is more a trigger than a root cause of violence.

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MYTH *"It only happens in problem families"*.

REALITY Men from all walks of life, all ethnic backgrounds & all ages abuse their women partners. There is no typical abuser, & no typical abused woman. Women's Aid has helped women whose partners were doctors, social workers, ministers, solicitors, psychiatrists. Most of the women who come to Women's Aid for help have no problems in their lives other than those caused by their partner's violence. Once they have escaped from the abuse, most women are as capable of leading as normal a life as anyone.

MYTH *"These men must be mentally ill"*.

REALITY For a lot of people, it is easier to believe that an abusive man is mentally ill than to accept that he knows exactly what he is doing when he assaults, or rapes or tortures his partner. Most men who abuser their partners are only violent to them, never to anyone else. Most men who abuse are able to function normally in society, in the workplace, in all their other contacts with people.

MYTH *"Men who abuse were abused themselves as children"*

REALITY There is no evidence that there is a 'cycle of violence', whereby children who were abused, or who witnessed abuse, go on to become abusers themselves. Many men who abuse come from families with no history of violence. Many have brothers who are not abusive. Children who witness abuse do not automatically grow up to be violent towards their partners, many completely reject the use of abusive behaviour as a result of their experience.
