

Domestic abuse:  
Getting the facts  
and challenging  
the myths.

**women's aid**  
until women & children are safe



# What is domestic abuse?

We define domestic abuse as an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer.

It is very common. In the vast majority of cases, it is experienced by women and is perpetrated by men. Domestic abuse is rarely a one-off incident and can escalate in frequency and severity over time.

## **Domestic abuse can include, but is not limited to the following:**

- Coercive control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence)
- Psychological and/or emotional abuse
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Financial or economic abuse
- Harassment and stalking
- Online or digital abuse

# Challenging the myths

Myths about domestic abuse are often widespread and deep-rooted. These prejudices lead many women to blame themselves for the abuse and often prevent them from seeking help.

We want to challenge some of the most commonly held myths so that women feel empowered to come forward and are believed and understood when they do.

## Myth #1

**If it was that bad, she'd leave.**

Women stay in abusive relationships for many different reasons and there are a range of psychological, emotional, financial and physical barriers that can make it difficult to leave, even if

she wants to. **A woman may be frightened for her life or for the safety of her children;** she may have nowhere to go; she may have no financial independence; she may be reliant on the perpetrator for care due to a disability.

Abusers often isolate their partners from family and friends in order to control them, making it very difficult for an abused woman to leave. Violence can also significantly escalate after separation.

## Myth #2

**He has never hit her, so it isn't really abuse.**

Domestic abuse isn't always physical, but it does almost always include controlling, manipulative behaviour that erodes someone's sense of self and independence.

**Coercive control is a criminal offence** and includes ongoing humiliation and frightening threats. This behaviour creates a prison that is invisible to the outside world, and instils a sense of fear that permeates all elements of a woman's life.



### Myth #3

She provoked him.

No one deserves to be assaulted, raped or emotionally abused. This myth is especially dangerous because any reference to 'provocation' means that we are blaming the woman and relieving the abuser of responsibility for his actions. **Abuse or violence of any kind is never the woman's fault.** Responsibility always lies with the perpetrator, and with him alone.

### Myth #4

Alcohol and drugs make men more violent.

Alcohol and drugs can make existing abuse worse, or be a catalyst for an attack, but they do not cause domestic abuse. **Men can be violent when they are sober and similarly many people use alcohol or drugs and do not abuse their partner.** Alcohol and drugs should never be used to excuse violent or controlling behaviour, the perpetrator alone is responsible for his actions.

### Myth #5

Women are attracted to violent men.

To suggest that some women are particularly attracted to abusive men unfairly blames the victim. **A perpetrator of domestic abuse can be charming and charismatic** when he first meets a new partner, and often no one, let alone the woman he has just met, would suspect he would ever be abusive in a relationship.

### Myth #6

Domestic abuse is a private matter.

Domestic abuse is a largely hidden crime, occurring primarily at home behind closed doors. Because of this, people think that what goes on in the home is private, and not their problem. But domestic abuse is a crime. It is against the law. **We are all affected by domestic abuse and we all have a responsibility to speak out against it.**

## Myth #7

**He can still be a good father.**

An estimated 90% of children whose mothers are abused witness the abuse. The effects are traumatic and long-lasting. When a child witnesses domestic abuse, **this is child abuse**. Between 40% and 70% of these children are also direct victims of the abuse which is happening at home.

Even if the children do not see or overhear the abuse, the perpetrator is still making a choice to be abusive towards their mother and not taking into account the children's wellbeing. He cannot be called a 'good father' whilst he is doing this.

## Myth #9

**Women often lie about abuse.**

False allegations about domestic abuse are extremely rare (Crown Prosecution Service, 2022). This myth is extremely damaging because the fear of being called a liar can and does deter women from reporting the abuse they have experienced.

## Myth #8

**Pornography is not linked to violence against women.**

Pornography contributes to a culture of misogyny, in which women and girls are abused by men for male pleasure. Women are harmed by pornography in two ways: directly, when they are used for the production of pornographic material; and indirectly, through the effects of mainstream availability and consumption of violent pornography.

## Myth #10

**Domestic abuse isn't that common.**

We know through our work over the last 50 years with survivors and local services that domestic abuse is very common. On average, one woman is killed by a male partner or ex-partner every week in the UK England and Wales. Domestic abuse has a higher rate of repeat victimisation than any other crime, and in the year ending December 2023, the police recorded a domestic abuse offence approximately every 40 seconds.

## Myth #11

Men who abuse women are mentally unwell.

There is no research that supports this myth. Abuse and violence are a choice, and there is no excuse for them. Domestic abuse happens throughout every level of society, regardless of health, wealth or status.

## Myth #13

Women are just as abusive as men.

Domestic abuse is rooted in a deeply patriarchal society and is born from men's sense of entitlement to own and control women. In the vast majority of cases, **domestic abuse is experienced by women and perpetrated by men**. A woman is killed by her male partner or former partner every four days in the UK England and Wales. Domestic abuse exists as part of the wider spectrum of violence against women and girls, which also includes different forms of family violence such as forced marriage, female genital mutilation and so-called "honour crimes" that are perpetrated primarily by family members.

## Myth #12

Men who abuse saw their fathers abuse.

Domestic abuse is prevalent throughout society, and because of this many people have grown up witnessing domestic abuse. Most of these people will never perpetrate domestic abuse in their own relationships, so it is never an excuse – and some of our most passionate supporters are child survivors of domestic abuse.

## Myth #14

Domestic abuse is a momentary loss of control.

Domestic abuse is rarely about losing control, but taking control. Perpetrators rarely act spontaneously when angry. They consciously choose when to abuse their partner: when they are alone, and when there are no witnesses (if there is a witness, then usually they are a child). They have control over whom they abuse.

## Myth #15

**All couples argue – it's just a normal relationship.**

Abuse and disagreement are not the same thing. Different opinions are normal and completely acceptable in healthy relationships. Abuse is not a disagreement – it is the use of physical, sexual, emotional or psychological violence or threats in order to govern and control another person's thinking, opinions, emotions and behaviour.

## Myth #16

**Women are more likely to be attacked by a stranger.**

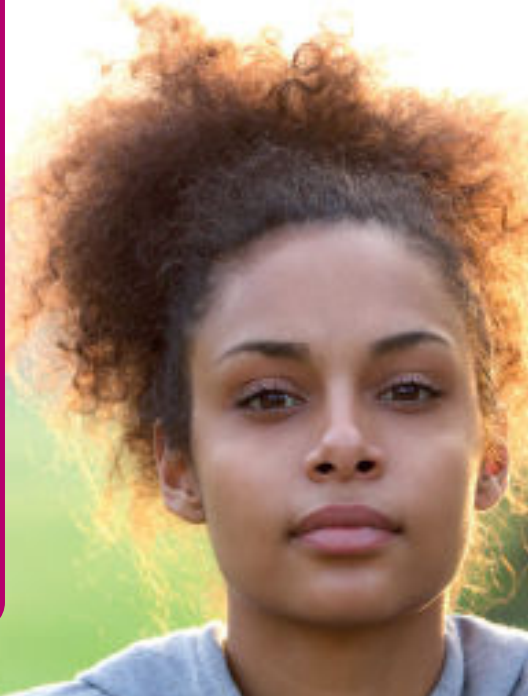
Women are far more likely to be assaulted, raped and murdered by men known to them than by strangers. Nine in ten (92.5%) of rapes against women during the year ending March 2022 were carried out by someone they knew, and perpetrators were most likely to be an intimate partner. On average, one woman is killed by a male partner or ex-partner every week in the UK England and Wales.





# Getting help

Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children across England. We give women and children the support they need to escape abuse, and we campaign tirelessly to address the root causes of violence against women.



If you or a friend need support, we are here to help.

Taking that first step and seeking help can be really hard. Please don't suffer in silence. We can offer confidential, non-judgemental support.

**If you are ever in immediate danger, always call the police on 999.**



You can reach out to Women's Aid via our email service. We won't tell you what to do but we can give information and support. We will respond to your email within 5 working days.

**[helpline@womensaid.org.uk](mailto:helpline@womensaid.org.uk)**



Visit **[www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/](http://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/)** for more about the support we offer including our Survivors Forum; a safe, anonymous space for women who have been affected by domestic abuse to share their experiences and support one another.



"Being lucky enough to access refuge meant the difference between life and death.

I know that sounds dramatic but he would have tried to kill me and I was feeling so trapped, I would have let him. I got away with my tiny baby and was able to become the confident kind of mother I never even knew I could be. Women's Aid made both our lives what it is today."

**Sarah, survivor\***

**This is why we're here.  
We want to help more women  
like Sarah, but we need your help  
to do it.**

**Please donate if you can  
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