[Sexual](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/sex%22%20%5Co%20%22Psychology%20Today%20looks%20at%20Sexual) abuse is any sexual activity that occurs without consent. Also referred to as sexual assault or sexual violence, it includes unwanted sexual touching, forced oral sex, and rape, among other sexual acts. No matter which act occurs, it’s not the survivor’s fault that they were assaulted—and help is available to begin healing from such abuse

Understanding [Sexual](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/sex) Abuse

Sexual violence is a pervasive problem. The abuse can lead to shock, [fear](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/fear), sadness, and in some cases, an [anxiety](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/anxiety) or depressive disorder. But therapy, coping skills, and social support can relieve the burden and help survivors heal.

Personal, societal, and legal hurdles often prevent survivors from disclosing the abuse and receiving the help they deserve. Although the #MeToo movement and the national discussion that ensued helped to address sexual harassment and assault, there’s still a long way to go to create cultural change and stop sexual violence.

If you’re concerned that a loved one is suffering sexual abuse, asking them directly can lead to relief, support, and treatment. The [signs that an adult may have been sexually assaulted](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/trauma-and-hope/201704/overcoming-sexual-assault-symptoms-recovery) include:

• Anxiety about specific situations that didn’t previously prompt anxiety

• Avoiding specific people or places

• Persistent sadness or depression

• Low self-esteem

• Disturbed sleep or nightmares

• Self-harming behavior

• [Suicidal](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/suicide) thoughts

• New sexually transmitted infections

What can I do to support a survivor of sexual abuse?

The most important thing to do is to simply [listen and believe your loved one.](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-sum-my-parts/201107/when-loved-one-is-survivor-sexual-abuse-part-one) Validate their emotions, ask questions, and avoid casting judgment. Help them explore options and resources, such as seeking medical [attention](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/attention), reporting the [crime](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/law-and-crime), calling an abuse hotline, or seeking therapy. Although you may have strong opinions, set those aside—the survivor should make every decision for themselves when they feel ready to do so.

Key facts

* Violence against women – particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence – is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights.
* Estimates published by WHO indicate that globally about 1 in 3 (30%) of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.
* Most of this violence is intimate partner violence. Worldwide, almost one third (27%) of women aged 15-49 years who have been in a relationship report that they have been subjected to some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner.
* Violence can negatively affect women’s physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health, and may increase the risk of acquiring HIV in some settings.
* Violence against women is preventable. The health sector has an important role to play to provide comprehensive health care to women subjected to violence, and as an entry point for referring women to other support services they may need.

Introduction

The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." *(1)*

Intimate partner violence refers to behaviour by an intimate partner or ex-partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours.

Sexual violence is "any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object, attempted rape, unwanted sexual touching and other non-contact forms".

* [World report on violence and health](https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789241564793)

Scope of the problem

Population-level surveys based on reports from survivors provide the most accurate estimates of the prevalence of intimate partner violence and sexual violence. A 2018 analysis of prevalence data from 2000-2018 across 161 countries and areas, conducted by WHO on behalf of the UN Interagency working group on violence against women, found that worldwide, nearly 1 in 3, or 30%, of women have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner or non-partner sexual violence or both *(2)*.

* [Global and regional estimates of violence against women](https://www.who.int/publications-detail-redirect/9789240022256)

Over a quarter of women aged15-49 years who have been in a relationship have been subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner at least once in their lifetime (since age 15). The prevalence estimates of lifetime intimate partner violence range from 20% in the Western Pacific, 22% in high-income countries and Europe and 25% in the WHO Regions of  the Americas to 33% in the WHO African region, 31% in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean region, and 33% in the WHO South-East Asia region.

Globally as many as 38% of all murders of women are committed by intimate partners. In addition to intimate partner violence, globally 6% of women report having been sexually assaulted by someone other than a partner, although data for non-partner sexual violence are more limited. Intimate partner and sexual violence are mostly perpetrated by men against women.

Lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic impacts have increased the exposure of women to abusive partners and known risk factors, while limiting their access to services. Situations of humanitarian crises and displacement may exacerbate existing violence, such as by intimate partners, as well as non-partner sexual violence, and may also lead to new forms of violence against women.