

ABORTION & CONTRACEPTION SERVICE

UNPLANNED PREGNANCY IN VIOLENT OR ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS



the women's
the royal women's hospital
victoria australia

If you are at risk call LifeLine on 13 11 14 or Safesteps on 1800 015 188

Women's experiences

The Royal Women's Hospital listens to the experiences of many women. Some women are in relationships that aren't supportive, or could be described as abusive or violent.

Women often tell us these relationships affect them and their decisions when pregnant. This can be difficult and confusing.

What is violence against women?

Pregnancy is a red flag for violence in relationships to escalate or for first incidents of family violence to occur (DVRVC, 2017).

One in four Australian women will experience domestic violence at some time in their life.¹

Domestic violence can include:

- physical, emotional and sexual abuse
- threats
- isolation from family and friends
- controlling behaviour
- harming things the woman loves
- causing fear for her safety or that of another person, including her child.²

Domestic violence can impact women emotionally, physically, spiritually, culturally and financially.³

Violence against women is often by someone they know – partners, ex-partners, family members or friends.⁴

The Women's recognises that violence is unacceptable, illegal and that women have the right to live without it. We want to support women to make the best decision about what

is best for them. This can include putting them in touch with organisations that help them understand their legal rights about domestic violence and sexual assault.

What is reproductive coercion?

Unplanned pregnancy can happen in relationships where women don't always have control over their sexual and reproductive lives. Partners (or others) can pressure women emotionally, psychologically or physically. It can be the pressure to:

- have sex
- get pregnant
- continue a pregnancy
- have an abortion.

This is called reproductive coercion. This is a term that describes a range of pregnancy-controlling behaviours. These behaviours can include but are not limited to:

- birth control sabotage (contraception is deliberately thrown away or tampered with)
- threats and use of physical violence if a woman insists on condoms or other forms of contraception
- emotional blackmail coercing a woman to have sex or to fall pregnant, or to have an abortion as a sign of her love and fidelity,
- forced sex and rape.⁵

Research tells us women can experience coercion from a partner to either become pregnant, continue with a pregnancy they do not want, or to terminate a pregnancy they wish to continue.

It usually occurs within the context of relationships which are violent in other ways as an additional tool used by perpetrators of violence.

Is this happening to me?

Being in an abusive relationship can make your decision about an unplanned pregnancy even harder. Women often feel pressure from their partner to decide one way or the other. Such pressure includes name-calling, threats, intimidation, blackmail and assault, like:

- 'I will leave you if you don't have (an abortion/this baby).'
- 'You've probably slept with other men anyway. I don't believe it's mine.'
- 'If you loved me you would do it (have an abortion/have a baby).'
- 'I will tell your (parents /friends /family /workplace) if you don't have an abortion.'
- 'You are making me be violent because you won't have (an abortion/a baby).'
- 'You are killing your baby.'
- 'You must have an abortion as I don't want a kid.'
- 'You must have this baby as I won't let you have an abortion.'
- 'If you don't have an abortion I will take the baby when it's born.'

How will this affect your decision about your pregnancy?

Because domestic violence is about abuse of power, abusers may try to further control women's lives by making their reproductive decisions for them. It is very difficult for women to make decisions about pregnancy when living in such a situation. Often, women experiencing domestic violence do not have the freedom to make all their own decisions.

Regaining control

Unplanned pregnancies in violent relationships can lead to a 'double crisis'. Women often feel the crisis of the actual violence and the crisis of the unplanned pregnancy. This can feel as

though power and control over a situation have been taken away. It's during the crisis of an unplanned pregnancy that women often begin to regain power and control over their lives.

This can happen when women make the best decision they can, for themselves, and for the future direction of their lives.

The following stories are from pregnancy options counselling with women:

Rebecca

Rebecca was unsure of continuing her pregnancy because of her current relationship. Rebecca said 'Chris' was 'charming' in public, but in private was 'controlling' and 'abusive'. He isolated her from friends and family and this was part of the way he kept control. After exploring this in counselling, Rebecca tried to reconnect with her family as a way to support herself in a life without Chris. Rebecca's family understood when she told them about Chris' behaviour. She then felt she had the support needed to continue her pregnancy.

Isabelle

Isabelle said her partner was abusive and that she feared having a child with him. This fear was for her safety and that of a child. Her partner told her repeatedly that having an abortion was selfish and immoral. This made her ashamed of considering an abortion even though she often said it was 'cruel to bring a child into the world' in her circumstances. She was especially worried about being connected to this partner for the rest of her life through a child. With the help of counselling and domestic violence services, Isabelle worked out a way she felt she could leave the relationship safely. She decided to end the pregnancy. Isabelle was relieved afterwards because she felt she made 'the right decision' for herself and her 'potential child'.

If you have an unplanned pregnancy and these or other situations sound familiar, you might find it helpful to discuss your situation with a pregnancy options counsellor or Domestic Violence service.

Useful phone numbers

- **1800MyOptions** 1800 696 784
- **Lifeline** 13 14 11
- **Safe Steps** - Family Violence Response Centre 1800 015 188
- **InTouch** Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence (03) 9413 6500 or Free call 1800 755 988
- **Police** 000

References

1. Walsh, D & Weeks, W, 'Executive Summary' in 'What a smile can hide: A report on the study of violence against women during pregnancy', Women's Social Support Services, Royal Women's Hospital, August 2004, p.12.
2. Better Health Victoria, 'Domestic Violence', <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Domestic_violence_why_men_abuse_women>, viewed November 2009.
3. Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service (WDVCS) brochure, Melbourne, Victoria.
4. E Miller, M Decker, H McCauley, D Tancredi, R Levenson, J Waldman, P Schoenwald, J Silverman, 'Pregnancy Coercion, Intimate Partner Violence and Unintended Pregnancy' (2010) 81 Contraception 316
5. Amnesty International, 'Media Release 25/2/09: Plan to reduce violence against women under threat', citing Mouzos, J and Makkai, T 'Women's Experiences of Male Violence: Findings from the Australian Component of the international Survey on Violence Against Women', Australian Institute of Criminology, 2004.

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