Women’s experiences

The Pregnancy Advisory Service (PAS) at 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.

Unfortunately, the experience of violence against women is not an uncommon story. Amnesty International found that violence against women is common. In Australia, 57% of women have suffered some form of physical or sexual violence.¹

What is violence against women?

Abuse can be:

- verbal
- emotional
- psychological
- financial
- physical
- sexual.

Violence against women is often by someone they know – partners, ex-partners, family members or friends.²

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.

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.

Research at the Women’s showed that many women experience physical violence and psychological abuse during pregnancy. A high number (20%) said the violence lasted throughout their pregnancy. Some also said psychological abuse continued after physical violence had reduced.³

All of this makes it very hard for women to feel they are making a free choice about unplanned pregnancy.

About domestic violence

One in four Australian women will experience domestic violence at some time in their life.⁴ 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.⁵

Domestic violence can impact women emotionally, physically, spiritually, culturally and financially.⁶

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.
As Martha describes, women can become isolated during pregnancy in an abusive relationship:
‘Even before I was pregnant I knew my boyfriend had a temper. He’d crack it at me for small things. If I left the car window open or I didn’t feed the dog, he’d hit me. I knew that the relationship was going to go nowhere. But I had nowhere to go. I didn’t tell my friends about the violence. I just felt uncomfortable letting friends know – I thought they might judge me. I felt that I’d put myself in the situation so I had to stay in it.’7

Pia thought her relationship might improve with the news she was pregnant:
‘I thought that after my baby was born we’d be closer. For the first couple of months he was good, then he started fading away. At times he played with his daughter, at times he couldn’t be bothered. Things got worse when I was 4 months pregnant with my son. He started hitting me.’8

Narelle felt pressured by her partner’s family who wanted her to have a baby and give it to them:
‘(I said) ‘What do you think I am? Your personal incubator… it’s not that I can’t cope with another baby… It’s that I don’t want to wreck my life to make you happy.’9

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 thought 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 PAS 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 PAS counsellor or Domestic Violence service.

Useful phone numbers
• Pregnancy Advisory Service 03 8345 3061
• Women’s Domestic Violence Crisis Service 1800 015 188
• Immigrant Women’s Domestic Violence Service 03 8413 6800 or Freecall 1800 755 988
• Police 000

References
5. Women’s Domestic Violence Crisis Service (WDVCS) brochure, Melbourne, Victoria.

Disclaimer
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