

# Family Violence and Pregnancy

*"I remember driving in the car ... and we got in an argument and I got a backhander in the mouth. And always during the pregnancies was when I got it the worst."*

While research has shown that in most cases, abuse during pregnancy is a continuation of abuse that began before pregnancy,<sup>1</sup> often, violence escalates and women may experience more severe, or specifically targeted, forms of violence during this time. Research has shown that almost two thirds of the abused women in a Canadian study reported that the abuse escalated during pregnancy<sup>2</sup> and that women who were abused during pregnancy were four times as likely as other abused women to say they experienced very serious violence (beatings, chokings, gun/knife threats, sexual assaults).<sup>3</sup>

Many women first experience physical violence during pregnancy. A 1993 study found that 40% of the women who were abused during pregnancy reported that the abuse began when they were pregnant.<sup>4</sup> One Canadian study has found the strongest predictor of abuse during pregnancy is a past history of abuse.<sup>5</sup>

*"I was eight months pregnant ... [and he] beat me up for three weeks, I started haemorrhaging. I don't know how I did it. ... I was supposed to have naps, I never had them and I wasn't supposed to be doing anything and I had to do everything...I used to lock the doors so nobody would come in and see the house. The house was such a mess and I was so worried, it was awful ... I left at eight months and I had the baby at eight and a half, and it was awful."*

*"His biggest abuse I think was neglect, neglected our basic needs. I remember a few weeks before our daughter was born ... something went [wrong] with the fridge and then a fuse went in the stove and I said to him "there's nothing to eat because there's nothing to cook with," and he said "well, I ate at my mother's."*

## Forms of Abuse During Pregnancy

In addition to other forms of abuse, during pregnancy, the abuser may:

- injure his partner with the intent of causing her to lose the baby;
- control, limit, delay or deny her access to prenatal care;
- use her pregnancy as a weapon in emotional abuse by:
  - refusing sex on the grounds that her pregnant body appears unattractive to him,
  - denying that the child is his,
  - refusing to support her during the pregnancy or birth;
- financially abuse her by refusing her access to money to buy food and supplies;
- restrict her access to food;
- force her to work beyond her endurance during pregnancy
- try to control decision making around the use or non-use of pain medication and/or other interventions during labour and delivery.

~ continued

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*The quotes in this document are from PEI women interviewed in 1999 during herStory of woman abuse and the PEI justice system, a project of the Woman Abuse and the PEI Justice System Research Team of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research.*

*"Well, when I was pregnant with my first child, after the miscarriages, we had very little food in the house ... he would sometimes ... go eat at the canteen and I wouldn't know. I can remember one day saying to him, "if we don't do something I'm going to go kill one of your cows and eat it," and I was very pregnant at that time ... he'd bring home dozens of people sometimes for me to feed at all hours of the day and night and he would even go out and send people home and not come home to eat, but he'd go up the street and tell everyone well, the wife's got dinner ready for him ."*

### **Impact of Abuse During Pregnancy**

Being abused during pregnancy can seriously affect a woman's health and well-being and that of her baby by causing:

- »»» pre-term labour and delivery
- »»» fetal death
- »»» direct fetal injury
- »»» rupture of the uterus, spleen, diaphragm and liver
- »»» increased stress which can lead to blood pressure elevation
- »»» decreased blood flow to the uterus and fetus
- »»» increased susceptibility to infection
- »»» low birth weight <sup>7</sup>

Women who experience violence during pregnancy are also at continued or increased risk of experiencing violence once the baby is born.

In PEI, family physicians provide all pregnant women with an opportunity to complete a psycho-social assessment which includes questions about abuse in relationships. The physician can then make referrals to available resources.

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2. Stewart, D. E., and Cecutti, A. 1993. *Physical abuse in pregnancy.* *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 149(9): 1257-126
3. *Statistics Canada. 1993a. The Violence Against Women Survey, 1993. Shelf Tables: 1-25*
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