

Is a woman you know being abused in a relationship?

A guide for
family members,
friends and neighbours



NAISTEN LINJA

Sisällys

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Introduction

This guide is the second adaptation of the pamphlet Is someone you know being abused in a relationship? This edition was published with the funding awarded by the Ministry of Justice in 2017 for support services for victims of crime.

The EU Directive on the rights of victims of crime (2012/29/EU) provides regulations relating to victims' rights to receive information, support and protection as well as to be consulted during criminal justice proceedings¹. Following the Directive, certain amendments were made to Finnish legislation in 2016. These amendments introduced new regulations on the obligation of officials to provide information to victims about their rights, personal evaluations and advice on support services. Further details on this legislation are provided below under the Chapter "The rights of the victims of crime".

In this guide, we use the term domestic violence to mean violence used against a woman by her husband, ex-husband, partner or ex-partner. While we focus in this guide on how to support women who have experienced violence, we hope that it will also be helpful when providing similar support to men who experience domestic violence. This guideline aims to answer some of the questions that we received from the public when they have contacted Women's Line for advice. Some 10 percent of those contacting Women's Line for advice have a female relative or friend who is a victim of domestic violence.

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is fairly common in Finland, and in most cases violence against women is committed by their partner. Throughout the guide we refer to the victim as 'she' and the offender as 'he' for simplicity, because the majority of victims are women. According to a study published in 2014, more than half of Finnish women have suffered from emotional abuse by their partner or ex-partner.² Whenever one of the parents in a family is a victim of domestic violence, the children are always affected by it.

Domestic violence against a woman is often a way of abusing power, with the other partner attempting to dominate and control the woman. Domestic violence can take many forms. It may be, for example:

- mental abuse, such as name-calling, humiliation, oppression, threats, isolation from other social contacts and controlling behaviour;
- financial abuse, such as controlling how the woman spends money or preventing the woman from working outside the home;
- physical abuse, such as preventing movement, slapping, hitting, kicking, banging the head, or using a weapon;
- sexual abuse, such as forced intercourse, rape, sexual humiliation or treating the woman as a sex object;
- online abuse, such as controlling the woman's use of social media, reading the woman's phone messages

and e-mails, or presenting themselves falsely as the woman;

- harassment, when an ex-partner follows, spies on, harasses or threatens the woman even after the relationship has ended.

Domestic violence is seldom an isolated incident, and typically the victim is subject to many forms of abuse. In fact, some women who have managed to escape domestic violence have described it as a tangled web of violence from which it is difficult to break free.

Domestic violence may begin gradually. It may start as criticism of the woman's behaviour, friends or job, anger over small matters, sulking or not allowing the woman enough sleep, for example. Over time, the violence tends to become more frequent and brutal. What makes domestic violence so damaging is that the perpetrator is someone the victim loves, in whom she has confided and whom she trusts or used to trust.

Domestic violence is never acceptable and it is never the victim's fault. Domestic violence seldom stops even if the victim changes the way she behaves or gives in to the demands of the partner. **The perpetrator is always responsible for the violence and changed behaviour.** Violence is a criminal offence.

All couples have conflicts and arguments. **Arguments and abuse are two completely different things.** In an equal and respectful relationship, both partners have the right to freely express their opinions, make their own decisions, be themselves and decline having sex. If one of the partners resorts to violence, these rights are typically not respected.

How do I know what is or isn't abuse?

You may be worried about someone you know and suspect that she is a victim of domestic violence. You may have a feeling that something is not right in their relationship.

The following may be an indication that the woman is a victim of domestic violence:

- She seems to be afraid of her partner and is always anxious to please her partner.
- She has stopped seeing her friends and relatives or avoids speaking on the phone when the partner is in the room.
- Her partner criticises or humiliates her in the presence of others. Sometimes the humiliation is dressed up as "humour".
- She says that her partner pressures or forces her into having sex.
- Her partner makes decisions on her behalf and controls her and, for example, who she can meet, how long she is allowed to stay outside the home and how she is allowed to spend money.
- She often speaks of her partner's jealousy, bad temper or possessiveness.
- She is anxious and depressed. Her self-esteem has decreased or she is unusually quiet.
- She has physical injuries (bruises, cuts, sprains, fractures etc.), but her account of how the injuries

"My family knew that my husband was violent, but I only found out that they knew after the divorce. We never talked about it. I was ashamed of my situation and I was afraid of worrying my mother. I was also afraid she would say, 'That's your choice, deal with it.' "

came about seems inconsistent with the injury, or she seems unusually accident-prone.

- The children are afraid of the partner or they are withdrawn or anxious. The woman is reluctant to leave the children in the partner's care.
- After separation, the ex-partner continues to harass the victim: calling her on the phone, following her or intruding into her home.

² European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights – FRA 2014
<http://fra.europa.eu/en/vaw-survey-results>

Why is it so difficult to leave?

Sometimes it is difficult for outsiders to understand, why the woman chooses to stay in an abusive relationship. Leaving seems such a simple and obvious solution. If the woman does not leave the partner, it is sometimes implied that the woman only has herself to blame if the abuse continues. If you haven't personally experienced domestic violence, it may be difficult for you to understand the repercussions of abuse.

There are many reasons why leaving an abusive relationship is difficult.

- **The woman may be afraid of what the partner might do if she leaves.** The partner may have made threats against the woman, her family, her children, pets or property. The partner may also have threatened to commit a suicide.
- **The woman may be ashamed of** being a victim of abuse, her partner's violent behaviour, having failed in a relationship and/or staying in an abusive relationship.
- **The woman still loves her partner,** because the partner is not violent all the time.
- **The woman hopes the partner will change.** The partner may have made promises to change and to stop behaving violently. Both might also be blaming the violent behaviour on an external factor, such as alcohol or work pressures, and believe that when these problems are solved, the abuse will stop.

- **The woman is committed to the relationship** or the idea of marriage being for life – "for better and for worse".
- **The woman believes that staying is in the best interests of the children.** However, domestic violence always affects the children involved.
- **The woman believes it is all her fault.** Blaming the woman for what happens is one of the most typical ways for abusive partners to shift the responsibility of their actions onto the victim and to justify the use of violence: "If you hadn't said/done/gone to XYZ, this wouldn't have happened."
- **As a result of violence,** the woman may feel powerless and unable to make a decision. Mental abuse breaks the woman's self-confidence and ability to think for herself.
- **Isolation and loneliness.** The partner may have restricted the woman's relationship with her friends and relatives and in this way isolated her from social contact. What can make this situation even worse is if the woman has limited knowledge of the country's language. Immigrant women may also be unaware of the support system available in Finland and of their own legal rights.
- **The family, relatives, friends or the religious community pressures the woman to stay in the relationship.** The woman may be afraid of being abandoned by her family or community.

- **The woman may think that she won't be free of her partner even if she leaves,** because they live in a small locality, they have mutual friends, or because they are part of the same ethnic or religious group.
- **Uncertain future.** The woman has nowhere else to go. Loneliness and managing on your own may seem scary. She may also be dependent on her partner's income. If the woman is disabled or elderly, she may also be dependent on the partner's assistance.

If a woman you know says she is afraid of her current or ex-partner, you must take her seriously. **The most dangerous time in an abusive relationship is seeking separation, when the woman mentions separation, when the couple moves into different addresses out or she seeks divorce.** If the woman decides to leave the abusive partner, tell her about the services listed at the end of this guide, to which she can turn for advice.

Should I intervene?

Don't turn a blind eye, raise the issue of abuse. It may be significant and help bring an end to the abuse. Most people will appreciate that you care about their well-being even if they are not willing to talk about their situation at that moment or even if your concern is unfounded. It is unlikely that things will get worse because you voice your concern about a person you know. Many are worried that an intervention is an unwelcome intrusion. Some may still regard abuse that happens at home as a private matter that is nobody else's business. Keep in mind, however, that certain types of intervention must be left to the public authorities (see "What can I do if I witness domestic violence").



How should I raise the issue?

Talk about abuse when you are alone with the woman. You might begin by saying: “I’m worried about you, because you have seemed so unhappy lately.” Tell her why you think so. **Ask directly about abuse, but be compassionate.** This way you can reassure her that she need not hide the abuse, that she is allowed to talk about it. Don’t pressure her to talk about abuse if she doesn’t want to. Tell her, however, that you are always happy to talk if she wants to.

She may deny the abuse or defend her partner. She may not be ready to admit that she is living in an abusive relationship or she is ashamed because of it. Perhaps she is too scared to talk about it because she is afraid of the consequences. She may also want to protect you from worry. If the victim of domestic abuse is male, talking about it may be difficult because he is afraid of how others will react – that he is seen as “weak” or “unmanly”.

How can I help?

- **Listen.**
- **Believe what she says and show that you understand.** It is more common for women to hide and belittle abuse than exaggerate it. If you know the perpetrator, it may be difficult for you to believe that this person could be violent towards the woman. The partner may behave in a completely different manner in company than when alone with the woman.
- **Give her credit for having the courage to tell you about the abuse.** It takes a lot of courage to talk about abuse.
- **Remember that abuse has many consequences.** These include rapidly changing moods and emotions – shame, guilt, anger, helplessness and fear – which are all normal reactions to the situation. A sense of isolation and being different from everyone else, difficulty concentrating, sleep problems, nightmares, increased use alcohol or drugs, and difficulties in other relationships may all be consequences of domestic abuse.
- **Always take abuse seriously and be clear where you stand: violence is always wrong.** Don’t underestimate the danger that the woman may be in. Domestic abuse is damaging both physically and mentally.
- **Tell her that the abuse is not her fault and that nothing justifies it.** You can say, for example, “In my opinion, your partner is not treating you well” or “Violence is never acceptable, even if he is your husband”.

- **Help her build her self-confidence.** Give her praise for having had the strength to manage her daily life so well despite the violence.

- **Respect her right to make her own decisions,** even if you disagree with them. Respect her cultural and religious values. However, do tell her that no culture or religion gives anyone the right to be violent.

- **Offer practical help,** for example, by minding her children or cooking. Taking care of daily routines is important. You can accompany her to the doctor or the police, if necessary.

- **Tell her about the services** listed at the end of this guide and encourage her to contact the authorities if you think this is necessary to solve the situation. Remind her that she can always phone these services and ask for advice. There are also services for those who resort to violence, but seeking help is always the responsibility of the offender.

- **Keep in touch, be a friend.** Talking regularly with a friend may be a crucial outlet for her.

- **Also support her in a situation where the offender is seeking help for his violent behaviour.** The situation often raises the hopes that the violence will end, but seeking help for violent behaviour is not a guarantee that the abuse will stop there and then.

- **Also continue supporting her if she leaves her violent partner.** Your friend may need different types of help and encouragement when

rebuilding her life and recovering from an abusive relationship. She may also need professional help or benefit from participating in a peer support group.

Do say:

- How can I help you?
- I think you know yourself what the best solution is at this point.
- How does your partner’s behaviour affect you?
- How do your children react to your partner’s behaviour?
- I’m worried about what he might do to you or your children.
- What do you think could solve the situation?
- What is it about leaving that scares you?
- What is it about staying that scares you?
- You are a wonderful, caring person and you deserve to be treated well.

“My best friend really helped me. She never judged me or made me feel like it was my fault.”

”You don’t have to understand what it’s like to be able to help.”

What you shouldn't do

When talking with a woman who is a victim of domestic violence, it is good to be aware of things that are usually unhelpful or that might even break the trust you have between you.

- **Never blame her for being a victim of abuse.**
- **Don't try to understand the "causes of violence", focus on supporting the victim.**
- **Don't criticise her**, even if she tells you she still loves her partner or if she decides to go back to her violent partner. Leaving an abusive relationship is often a long process. Don't pressure her to leave her partner.
- **Don't criticise her partner.** Tell her that nobody has the right to abuse her.
- **Don't give direct advice**, or tell her what you would do in her position. If she chooses not to take your advice, she might feel unable to talk honestly about her situation with you in the future.

How do I help her stay safe?

The most important thing to think about is how to help her avoid the violence in the future. Her safety can be a major concern, even if she has already left her partner.

- **The emergency phone number is 112.** The police can also be reached on this number.
- Encourage the woman to contact services that offer help.
- If the woman has recently experienced violence, **encourage her to see a doctor** as soon as possible after the incident. It is important that her injuries are taken care of and also that the incident and the injuries are documented for any potential future court case, even if the woman does not want to report the incident to the police at that moment. A doctor's certificate can also be used as grounds for a restraining order.

• **Reporting an offence to the police** is the only legal way to bring the offender to justice. Reporting domestic violence to the police sends a message to the offender that violence is not acceptable and has to stop. A report of an offence can also be used as grounds for a restraining order. Tell the woman that you are happy to come with her to the police, if necessary, but don't pressure her if she is not yet ready to speak to the police.

• Tell the woman about the **restraining order**. A person on whom a restraining order has been imposed is not allowed to meet the protected person or otherwise contact her or try to contact her. A domestic violence restraining order is also an option, which means that the offender must also leave his home in addition to the above restrictions. For more information about restraining orders is available from, for example, the police³. If the woman wants to apply for a restraining order or report domestic violence to the police, you can, if you wish, offer to act as a witness. In that case, it is a good idea for you to keep notes about your observations (times and dates of incidents etc.).

• Help the woman to think in advance about **how she could quickly escape the home and where she could go in the event of an emergency**. She could, for example, start following a regular routine that requires her to go outside (take out the garbage, walk the dog, etc.) Tell her about **women's shelters**.

- Help her pack a "**safety bag**" and keep it somewhere safe and easy to take. The bag should contain some money for a taxi, spare keys to the home or car, spare clothes (for her and the children), toiletries, medication and important documents and ID (or copies).
- You can agree on a **safe word or signal** that she can communicate to you when she needs help.

What should I do if I witness or hear sounds of domestic violence or a threat of violence?

Call 112 immediately. The professional operators at the emergency call centre will assess the situation and send assistance to the location where necessary.

If you can, talk to the woman when she is not in immediate danger and ask if she wants you to call the police. She may be afraid that calling the police will only make matters worse. If the woman has previously had bad experiences with the authorities, she might be afraid to call the police. For example, immigrant women may feel this way if their rights were not respected and they could not trust the authorities in their country of origin.

"After we separated, I was exhausted. The children needed me but my life was in complete chaos. The fact that my friends looked after me and gave me practical help with running the home helped me carry on from day to day."

³ http://www.poliisi.fi/crimes/restraining_order

Look after yourself!

Being concerned for someone who is a victim of domestic violence can be stressful and you may experience similar reactions as the victim. Fear, frustration, anger and feeling powerless are common feelings that are normal in this situation. Remember that you, too, need time to process your thoughts and feelings. It is important that you take care of yourself and your needs. Make sure you receive the support you need.

Sense of frustration

It is natural to feel frustrated or disappointed in this situation. However, it is important that you are there for the woman even if you don't understand her choices. Leaving a violent relationship is often a long process and a major upheaval, and it doesn't happen overnight. Tell her that you fear for her, but that you will be there to support her. Remember that the support you give her is very important and will have a positive impact, even if the woman you are supporting can't express this at that moment.

Coping

Be realistic about what type of support and how much you are able to give. Know your own boundaries. The only way you can be of real help is by also looking after yourself. Remember that you are not responsible for the violence or ending the violence! Tell her about the services listed at the end of this guide. They are there to help her. You also have the right to feel safe and be supported in your situation. Talk to someone you can trust or contact services that offer help (see under Where can I get help?).

Diverse women

In this guide, we use the term diverse women to mean women of special or minority groups. Shame and fear are present wherever there is domestic violence. For women of special and minority groups, these feelings may be many times worse.

Older women

In a long-term relationship, domestic violence may for decades or it may start as the partner becomes ill or frail with age. The situation for older women may be difficult because of the trauma and suffering caused by violence that has continued for a long time, because her own resources and social networks disappear, because there are very few services specifically for older people, or because of her poor financial situation. Most of the violence against ageing women is domestic violence⁴. What makes the suffering even worse is if the offender is her own child or grandchild. If you notice that an older woman who is your friend or relative is being abused, raise the topic as tactfully as you can. Age is no reason not to go to a women's shelter.

Women offenders

Women who have committed criminal offences themselves can also be victims and witnesses of violence. The fact that a woman is guilty of a crime does not affect her right to receive help and to recover from her experiences as a victim of violence.

⁴ AVOW is a study conducted in 2010 about abuse against older women.
<http://www.thl.fi/avow>



Immigrant women

Women who move to Finland from another culture are often unaware of the rights they have in Finland. In Finland, all women have the right make their own decisions about their own bodies, contraception, abortion etc. Professional advisers have a key role to provide information about women's rights in Finland when working with immigrant women. A friend or a neighbour can help an immigrant woman find the right professional to talk to. MONIKA – the Multicultural Women's Association in Finland is an organisation that can help immigrant women who have faced violence. It runs a women's shelter, Shelter Mona, where women from all over Finland are welcome.

Roma women

Women in the Roma community may be tied to a traditional woman's role, which may be very difficult change. This is why domestic violence suffered by Roma women may easily go unnoticed. Roma women often live under conflicting pressures from their partner, the Roma community and the surrounding society.

Help from outside the Roma community may be crucially important for Roma women, as the opportunities they have to seek support from their own community in a domestic violence situation may be limited. Therefore women's shelters and other public support services are extremely important for Roma women.

LGBTIQ+ people

Domestic violence in same-sex relationships is largely similar to domestic violence in heterosexual relationships. Domestic violence with the purpose of controlling one's partner is similar regardless of the context. Violence against a partner is always damaging to the children affected. Domestic violence in same-sex relationships is perhaps even a bigger taboo than domestic violence among heterosexual couples. Living in a heteronormative society may in itself create additional tensions between partners in LGBTIQ+ relationships. The need to hide violence may be more compelling than among heterosexual couples because there will always be those close relatives, for example, who think the couple should not be together in the first place. Those living as part of a "rainbow family" may be under constant pressure to prove that theirs is a "good family", so victims of domestic violence may be very reluctant to talk about domestic violence. In addition, the fear of being left alone in a crisis may be enormous if your circle of friends is very small and close-knit. However, it is extremely important to raise the issue so that the situation can be resolved and recovery can begin.

Disabled women

Disabled girls are still brought up, and disabled women still encouraged, not to want to live in an intimate relationship. If a disabled woman is a victim of

domestic violence, instead of receiving help and support, she may find herself being blamed for the situation. You shouldn't have started a relationship in the first place, you should have known your limits! The pressure and malicious expectations from outsiders to see the relationship fail may lead to a situation where a disabled woman tolerates far too much. In addition, their partner may be an important, if not the most important, source of practical assistance and support in their daily lives. The partner may threaten to put her in an institution or take away her children if she doesn't "behave". To others, the partner may seem like a hero. The attitude towards the relationships of disabled women should be as positive as with any relationship. If you see signs of violence or abuse, be a true friend and raise the subject with the woman. She has a statutory right to a service plan that secures other assistance for her besides her violent partner. Drawing up the service plan starts by contacting the social worker at the local disability services. As a friend, you could offer to act as a support person when drawing up the plan. More information on the statutory service plan and related legislation is available from disabled people's organisations and Vammaispalvelujen käskirja (Disability Services Handbook; in Finnish and Swedish)⁵. In addition, the EU Directive 2012/29/EU on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime has special provisions for disabled people (e.g. recitals 15 and 57)⁶.

⁵ Ojala Matti 2011. Vammaispalvelujen käskirja. <https://www.thl.fi/fi/web/vammaispalvelujen-käskirja> and <http://thl32-kk.lib.helsinki.fi/handle/10024/80408>

⁶ Official Journal of the European Union 2012. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FI/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012L0029&from=EN>

Rights of the victims of violence

A person who has experienced violence has the right to report the offence to the police and receive appropriate support from the police and, if necessary, the legal aid office. Reporting the offence to the police can be made easier for the victim by using reliable support services. Authorities should respond to a victim's report with respect, consideration, professionalism and without any discrimination. All this may empower the victim to free herself from a vicious circle of being victimised. The victim has the right to receive a written confirmation of the offence she has reported.

The victim of a crime has the right to medical care and assistance from social and healthcare services, including emergency social care, hospital care, physical and psychiatric rehabilitation for physical and mental trauma caused by violence under the same conditions as any other customer.

The victim has the right to receive information about the available support services. With the victim's permission, the police or another investigating authority may forward her contact details to support service providers who will then contact the victim. The victim has the right to be accompanied by a support person throughout the procedures. This support person is chosen by the victim herself. The victim also has the right to legal coun-

sel when reporting the offence to the police, during hearings and in court. The legal representative may be a lawyer, a public legal aid attorney or a licensed counsel. People with low and middle income may also be entitled to legal aid provided by the state.

People in a particularly vulnerable situation should be given special support and legal protection. These special support services include personal protection and safe accommodation. Those who are at a particularly high risk of secondary and repeat victimisation, intimidation and retaliation have the right to a personal situation assessment to determine the protective measures required.

For more information about the rights of victims of crime, please visit the following websites:

Ministry of Justice:
Victim Support Finland.
www.riku.fi/en/home/

Police:
www.poliisi.fi/crimes/victims_of_crime

Ministry of Justice 2015.
From legislation to action – proposal to improve the position of crime victims.
https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/76583/om_13_2015_valmis.pdf?sequence=1
(English Abstract)

Where to get help?

Women's Line

www.naistenlinja.fi

Free advice and support for women and girls facing domestic violence or the threat of domestic violence

and for people close to them. Women's Line also gives advice about other organisations that can help you.

Rape Crisis Centre Tukinainen

www.tukinainen.fi

Rape Crisis Centre Tukinainen provides support, assistance and advice to those who have been sexually assaulted and/or abused as well as for their families and friends and those working with victims.

Women's shelters

nettiturvakoti.fi

There are shelters for women and families throughout Finland run by the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters, local authorities or other organisations. The website provides information on your closest shelter.

MONIKA – Multicultural Women's Association, Finland

monikanaiset.fi

Shelter Mona phone 24h
045 639 6274

Support for immigrant women facing domestic violence.

The Varjo (Shadow) Project

www.varjohanke.fi

A project focusing on improving the safety of families living under the threat of violence and harassment after a relationship has ended and on preventing harassment.

Public Legal Aid Offices

oikeus.fi/oikeusapu

Legal aid is there to give individuals the option of obtaining assistance for legal matters at the expense of the state, either fully or partially. In Finland legal aid covers all sorts of legal matters. The victim of serious violent crime or sexual crime may be provided with a trial counsel at the expense of the state, regardless of his or her financial status.

In court proceedings, legal aid is offered by Public Legal Aid Attorneys, Advocates and other lawyers licensed to assist clients. Legal aid is also available in matters related to divorce and the custody of and the right of access to a child. For contact information for legal aid offices throughout Finland and for further information, please visit the website.

Victim Support Finland

www.riku.fi

The aim of Victim Support Finland (RIKU) is to improve the position of victims of crime, their loved ones and witnesses of criminal cases by influencing and producing support services.

Lyömätön Linja Espoossa

www.lyomatonlinja.fi

The purpose of this service is to offer help to anyone who has been abusive or is afraid they might behave abusively in their family or other close relationship.

Nollalinja

Phone 24 h: 080 005 005

Against domestic violence and violence against women.

