

# Understanding Violence

## The Words We Use

We live in a society where violence against women still exists, even though generations of people have worked to end it. Violence against women is deeply rooted in our cultures, our institutions and our religions. We gain insight into the present from looking at the past. There are systems of oppression that have existed for centuries, systems so entrenched we have difficulty seeing them at all.

Understanding comes as we see connections between a woman being battered by her husband, a child being abused by a male relative, a woman being harassed at work, a trans woman being beaten for using a bathroom, and a teenager being sexually assaulted on the street. All these types of suffering are linked by something called patriarchy.

### Definitions of words can help us:

***patriarchy***: a system of male dominance over women and children

–this is entrenched in social and family systems, cultures, governments and religions

–relationships are ordered hierarchically, with men having more power

–this inequality is maintained through language, stories and beliefs

***sexism***: deeply rooted attitudes that men are superior and women are inferior

***heterosexism***: discrimination against people who are not heterosexual

***abuse***: violence that takes place in a relationship of trust, where the person with more power abuses the person with less power

\* ***feminism***: a movement of women and men working to expose and eliminate prejudice against women.

\* ***feminist***: anyone who uses feminism as a way of understanding the world

These definitions are important for understanding how violence works in the lives of women. Sexism is not the only system of oppression. There are many other systems that interact with sexism to make life more difficult for some women. Women of colour struggle both from sexism and racism, as people discriminate against them because of their gender and their skin colour. In a similar way, women with physical challenges, gender minorities and newcomers to this country, to name a few, must deal with multiple types of discrimination.

Eradicating violence against women is not enough to end the suffering of women. However, the work to end violence against women plays an important part in creating a world where all people are valued.

## Patriarchal Origins

In order to understand the way patriarchy works in our society today, we must understand the roots of patriarchy in our history. The oldest patriarchal society with which most of us are familiar is seen in the Old Testament: the Hebrew world of the patriarchs. It reveals that society was dominated by men. This is seen in an obvious way by the how many stories there are in the Bible. This is no surprise since most of the Bible was written by men (since women were not educated and often couldn't read or write). God is described as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

There are female characters in the Bible: we do know that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were married, but these women are generally not central characters. We hear about Sarai because she was married to Abram, we hear about Leah and Rebekah and Bilhah and Zilpah because they bore children to Jacob. Miriam is known as Moses' sister. Patriarchy in the Hebrew Bible is shown by the structure of the family where men were the heads of households and membership was counted through the male line.

We hear tantalizing little pieces of women's stories. In the story of Jacob and his twelve sons, who became the twelve tribes of Israel, there is mention of the fact that Leah, Jacob's wife, also had a daughter named [Dinah](#).

Genesis 34 describes the rape of Dinah and how her brothers killed to avenge her violation. We know that Dinah was assaulted, but the story as it is written is about her brothers and their actions. The story is peripherally about Dinah; she does not have a speaking role, and we don't know her reaction to the man who raped her. We do know that she passes out of recorded history after this event.

There are a few exceptions where women take centre stage, like the story of Esther. Undoubtedly, there were many women in biblical times who, like Esther, lived heroic and faithful lives, but we do not hear much about them. The female characters we do read about are often presented in ambiguous ways, as is the case with [Eve](#) or [Miriam](#).

The Bible was written in a patriarchal society, and the stories reflect those attitudes. Women were not valued as much as men in that time, and so they play a background role. The stories we do read about women show us that their lives were affected by sexism. Their gender determined that they would be treated in oppressive ways.

This dominance of male characters in the Bible reflects the fact that male dominance was institutionalized in that society. Women were usually not allowed to hold positions of power in ancient Israel. There were no female priests, and very few examples of [queens](#).

The laws recorded in Scripture provide many examples of the ways in which women's lives were restricted to a certain role. This is not to say that there were never any powerful women in Israel; rather, it means that only extraordinary women under extraordinary circumstances were able to hold positions of power. The institutions of family, religion and government were designed to keep women subordinate.

Israel was similar to other patriarchal societies in that same period of history. For example, in nearby Mesopotamia, laws stated that a man could pledge his wife, concubine and his children by them into slavery to repay his debts. If a son taken into slavery was killed, the creditor's son was to be killed. There was no penalty if wives, concubines or daughters were mistreated or killed. Women were treated as the property of their husbands.

The story of Sarai and Hagar in Genesis is an example of this same attitude. When Sarai was unable to bear children, another woman was needed to bear those children. Sarai gives Abram her slave Hagar to bear children for him. Hagar, as a slave and a woman, had no power to choose whether or not she would submit to this decision. That she was not happy with the decision is made clear by her choice to run away.

Some societies did offer some limited freedom to women in certain circumstances. In Mesopotamia, upper-class women often held considerable economic, legal and judicial power as they looked after their families' interests. But their power was given to them by men, and it could be taken away without any recourse on the women's part.

In [Rome](#), women had limited power. Husbands and fathers were allowed to put a woman to death without a public trial. Although these executions were rarely carried out, they showed that physical abuse of women was generally accepted. Women were always under the authority of their [fathers](#).

In the New Testament period, society was still patriarchal. Women had limited legal rights. A woman caught in adultery faced stoning, while her partner was not treated in the same way. A woman could not hold property or positions of power. Women who were menstruating were considered unclean. Men avoided touching them at this time, just as they avoided touching a dead body or someone who had leprosy.

Jesus challenged many common assumptions about women. He used women as illustrations in his stories. He saved the life of a woman caught in adultery, reminding those who would stone her that they were not without sin. He was not afraid to touch a woman who was considered unclean.

Jesus also included women in his circle of followers. We hear of Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, Joanna, Susanna and Salome. Some of these women financially supported his work. He declared his divine mission to both the Samaritan woman and to Martha of Bethany. Women played a central role in stories of the resurrection. While the New Testament gives us glimpses that women were active in following Jesus, we hear little about these faithful women today.

There are indications in accounts of the [early church](#) that women were powerful witnesses to Christ, and led Christian communities. However, in the letters of the New Testament, we see that men tried to limit women's prophetic roles by suggesting that they should be silent in church. Many women continued to be active in the early centuries of the Christian church, although church fathers such as Jerome, Tertullian, Augustine and John Chrysostom emphasized women's inferiority.

Women have been present and active in the church throughout its history, even though they were not officially allowed to hold positions of power until recently. An exception was made for those women who chose celibacy; nuns were allowed to head organizations of women, but even those women were under the power of the male hierarchy. The [Beguine](#) movement in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is one of the few examples of a women's movement that was powerful and not controlled by men.

Even though women have been victimized by patriarchy, it's wrong to think of women primarily as victims. Women have always been agents in history, working where they could. Women were not the only oppressed group in patriarchal societies. Power was institutionally denied to many people. Foreigners, people with physical or mental challenges, poor people or slaves were among those who were oppressed. Women who were in the upper class benefitted from the oppression of women from the lower classes.

## Writing Our Own History

While women throughout history may have recognized that life was harder for women than for men, they usually didn't have the ability or means to record their thoughts. One of the keys to improving the life of women, and eradicating violence against them, is being able to name what is happening. But patriarchy has meant that many women were systematically denied access to education. Few found the time or space to think together about their lives in terms of a larger group.

There have always been exceptional women who were able to speak about their lives and find the space to write down their thoughts. These women were often the wives or daughters of influential men, or they were women who had chosen a life of celibacy in service of the church. But these exceptional women who were thinking and writing about women's role in society rarely had their works published. Even if they had the means to publish their own works, their books were not kept or discussed. This meant that later women writers did not have a body of women's thinking upon which to build.

In a sense, each generation of women thinkers had to re-invent the wheel, not knowing that anyone had thought their ideas before them. The women's movement, or what came to be known as the feminist movement, gradually developed in Western society in conjunction with women's access to education.

This history of western society contrasts sharply with [aboriginal history](#) in North America. In First Nations and Inuit communities women were never seen as inferior.

Women and men had different roles but both had integral places in sustaining society. This history is being shared through the work of indigenous historians who are exploring the role of women in different [tribes](#).

The arrival of Europeans to what some cultures called Turtle Island (North America), brought untold devastation on many levels. Wholesale murder, theft of land and deliberate spreading of disease rocked aboriginal cultures. One of the destructive ideas imported was sexism, which viewed women as less than men. The [equal treatment](#) of women in aboriginal cultures was threatened.

In Western society, feminism began with thinkers like the European woman [Mary Wollstonecraft](#) (1759–1797). She was one of the forerunners of the modern feminist movement. In her book *Vindications of the Rights of Women*, she suggested that women and men were equal and should be treated that way. She came from a violent and poverty-stricken family and wrote of trying to protect her mother from her father's blows.

In her final unfinished novel called *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft tells the story of two women from different social classes. The story includes depictions of rape and sexual violence, poverty, men's power and women's relative helplessness. Isolated voices like Wollstonecraft's railed against the prejudice that crippled women's lives and the apathy of a society that did not question violence against women. Women were subordinate to men, and that was the way the world was.

## Legally Sanctioned Violence

Historically, most European countries allowed husbands to punish their wives physically. In the [Middle Ages](#), governments intervened only when the woman was killed by her husband. Gradually, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, limits were placed on the type of physical punishment men could deliver.

[Puritan](#) thinkers spoke out against the abuse of women by their husbands, saying that men should not lay violent hands on their wives. Laws evolved that limited the force a man could use, but there is little evidence that these laws were enforced.

In the book *Canadian Women: A History*, the authors point to the reality of violence against women in Canada's history, citing examples as varied as a Mi'qmac woman in Nova Scotia in the seventeenth century, a woman living in Louisbourg in New France, and a young Montreal woman working in a factory in the late 1800s. Husbands were in charge of their wives, and could confine them to their house, control their right to work outside the home, and use physical punishment against them.

In the 1800s in Canada, rape was a crime punishable by death; however, the victim was not seen to be the woman herself, but rather the woman's husband or father. In some cases it appears that a rape conviction required proof that violent resistance to the rape

occurred. Other cases assumed that if pregnancy resulted, it was not rape. In any case, trials about rape such as these were heard before an all-male jury.

Women had no legal recourse against their husbands. They could not charge them with rape or testify in court against them. After 1870, women could sue their husbands for damage to their property, but not for damage to their person. Women who left their husbands after repeated beatings were blamed for failing to leave after the first beating, while those who left after one beating were blamed for not being patient with their husbands.

Property laws in the 1800s were entirely biased in the direction of men. A woman by law would inherit one-third of the husband's property upon his death, but if she left before he died, she was entitled to nothing. A man owned his children as well, and women who left their husbands could not take their children with them.

Divorce was possible but difficult to obtain in Canada in the 1800s. A woman could receive a divorce from her husband if he committed adultery, but only if she could prove that he also was guilty of rape, bestiality, bigamy, cruelty or desertion for at least two years. The marriages of women in Quebec were only dissoluble by death. As late as 1929, Quebec law allowed a man to get legal separation from his wife on the grounds of adultery, while at the same time a wife had to prove that her husband had brought his new partner with him to live in the family home.

The [Woman's Christian Temperance Union](#) (WCTU) was an organization best remembered for its campaign to discourage alcohol consumption. It was formed because women wanted to better the lives of other women. The WCTU expressed concern about young vulnerable women who were attracted to urban centres and then seduced by men who wanted to take advantage of them. Women advocated temperance from alcohol as a possible solution to the problem of women's suffering. WCTU was successful in bringing in Temperance (prohibiting the sale of alcohol) in parts of Canada for a few years.

Prohibiting the sale of alcohol didn't change society as much as the WCTU hoped. This prompted the organization to look at the powerlessness of women in the public sphere. They started campaigning for women's right to vote (suffrage).

Women's suffrage was believed to be the way that women could effectively exercise their moral influence on society. The WCTU movement was not inclusive of immigrant or aboriginal women, as people from the non-dominant culture were often viewed as inferior and in need of enlightenment. Middle and upper class white women worked to get the vote for women, but their racist attitudes were not good news for all women.

The influence of organized women's groups gradually had an effect on legislation. Between 1872 and 1907, Married Women's Property acts were passed in all the provinces except Alberta. Under these laws, a married woman's property and her earnings were legally her own.



Gradually, provinces started instituting laws that helped women who had been abandoned by their husbands, although this did not include women who left their husbands, even for reasons of cruelty. 1921 was the first year that women had a right to vote and run in Canadian federal elections.

These [changes came about](#) as a result of dedicated campaigning of generations of women. Unfortunately, the racist attitudes of many feminists meant that immigrant women and First Nations and Inuit women were often not included in these rights. Women of colour in Canada faced different challenges than white women. [Black women](#) settlers faced discrimination because of their colour. [Asian women](#) were simply excluded from Canada because of racist policies that limited immigration of people from certain countries.

Courageous women like [Nahebahwequa](#) (Catherine Sutton) campaigned for property rights, and [Viola Davis](#) took major risks to acquire basic human rights. Aboriginal peoples only won the right to vote in 1960, almost forty years after white women were voting.

## The Role of Churches

Throughout its history, the Christian church has traditionally supported the belief that men were responsible for their wives, teaching that the husband should maintain order as the divinely sanctioned head of the household. Just as adults were expected to punish children, so the husband was divinely sanctioned to punish his wife. For centuries, therefore, the church turned a blind eye to violence within the home.

Early feminists like [Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#) and Susan B. Antony called for justice for women from the context of their strong Christian roots. Stanton was adamant that discrimination should be addressed, even if it occurred in scripture. Her pioneering work on women's interpretation of the Bible resulted in the [Women's Bible](#).

[Sojourner Truth](#), a black woman who was a former slave, was one of the first activists who made the connection between slavery and violence against women. Sojourner Truth was motivated by her strong Christian faith to become an itinerant minister. She also challenged the sexism of the abolition movement, which was working to get the vote for black men, but not for black women: "There is a great deal of stir about colored men getting their rights but not a word about the colored women's theirs, you see, the colored man will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring, because if we wait 'till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again."

In the early 1900s, women in North America were starting to organize on many levels. In Protestant churches women's groups met to send out missionaries, to build churches and to reform society. These women's groups supported women's right to vote as a way of making society a better place. This included giving women property rights and the legal ability to have custody of their children. Theological movements, such as

the [Social Gospel](#) movement, believed that it was the churches' responsibility to reform society. Improving the conditions that oppressed women was a part of that social agenda.

Not all sectors of the Christian church were happy with these feminist reforms. From the turn of the century to the 1930s, leaders in the all-male Roman Catholic hierarchy in Quebec, for example, spoke out strongly against women's rights, suggesting that women's God-ordained role was in the private, domestic sphere.

Some feminists were openly critical of the church, and its teaching of female submission. Other feminists chose to live sexually free lifestyles. These criticisms and rejection of church teachings on women shocked many Christians in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some churches distanced themselves from the feminist movement because they believed it challenged biblical values.

The movement of feminist reforms in Canadian churches were motivated, at least in part, by the belief in racial superiority of whites over immigrant, Aboriginal and Métis groups. British-Canadian culture was seen as vastly superior to that of others, such as people of Eastern European or Aboriginal heritage. Issues of class were also critical, as more advantaged Christians patronized the poor, believing they knew what was best for them.

The negative side of the reform movement is most clearly illustrated by the system of residential schools. At the same time that Protestant reformers were championing change for women, Christian organizations were helping the federal government to develop the residential school system for First Nations and Inuit peoples. They were in a particularly vulnerable position due to political, economic and legal oppression. Residential school education was a system where children were removed from their homes for lengthy periods of time and sent away, often over great distances, to boarding schools.

These schools were often run by Christian denominations. In the schools, children were isolated from their traditions and cultures. They were not allowed to speak their language. Removing them from their homes was [cultural genocide](#). With no one to advocate for them, children suffered neglect and abuse, both physical and sexual, from workers in the school.

The painful history of the treatment of First Nations and Inuit peoples in the residential school system is slowly being written, and the voices of those who had been neglected and abused are being heard. The [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) has started the process of naming the painful history that we share.

Black women who write history point out that they have a different story to tell than white feminist writers. White feminists have been critical of the church for hindering women's freedom and preventing needed reforms, but black women have often experienced church differently. The exclusion of blacks from many white churches



brought about the establishment of new churches led and populated by black people. Originating because of discrimination, these churches became a place where black culture and life could be cultivated. They have often been a place of empowerment.

The Christian church has worked to alleviate violence against women. At the same time, the church has also helped to perpetuate abuse. The church has not always been comfortable with criticisms that feminists and others have mounted against its own patriarchal structures. Many churches supported women's suffrage and women's right to hold political office, yet these same churches were often reluctant to ordain women to positions of leadership.

## Our World Today

As we examine our churches and society, we can see how the patriarchal attitudes which influenced our history are still shaping the beliefs and culture of our world today.

Sexual violence is deeply rooted in the attitudes and beliefs we hold as a society. These systems of belief can be seen as a "structural violence" which means that violence is set up to grow and continue.

These systems of oppression take everyday forms. Women and even girls are sexualized in popular media, everything from television to advertising. Women are held to different standards than men: sexually promiscuous men are seen as powerful and successful, while women are shamed and put down for the same behavior. Even our jokes can be part of this system, where rape and wife-beating are seen as funny.

This same culture is present in more sanitized form in the hierarchy in churches, where women are relegated to certain subordinate roles, and told that God did not create them to be leaders.

Addressing violence against women will involve examining patriarchal systems in every part of our society. Recent movements to expose sexual violence, as seen in the social media hashtag #MeToo are promising. Women have been sharing their stories of sexual violation by powerful men. In some cases, men have been removed from their positions, or face criminal charges. For many vulnerable women who have been abused by their bosses or other powerful men in society, saying #MeToo is still too dangerous.