
SAFETY AND VIOLENCE

I'm a [domestic violence] survivor...but I can tell you that I have faith. And, no matter what people try to do to you and try to condemn you, you know you can still survive. I can say I've pulled myself out of it.

– Focus Group Participant

Despite growing awareness of the problem, violence remains a major threat to the well-being of women and girls. Violence against women and girls includes physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological actions or threats of action, and occurs predominantly within the context of the most intimate relationships with family, friends, and acquaintances.

A recent study found that, in their lifetimes, 44 percent of Washington women 18 and older experienced some form of abuse by an intimate partner.¹³³ One-third (38 percent) of women in Washington report they were sexually assaulted in their lifetime,¹³⁴ with the vast majority of these sexual assaults occurring in childhood. Women are much more likely than men to be victims of sexual assault, although men and women report similar rates of lifetime physical abuse.¹³⁵ In extreme, but unfortunately not uncommon, cases, physical abuse can result in death. A recent study reported that 50 percent of all women murdered in Washington in 2005 were killed by a current or former boyfriend or husband.¹³⁶

All women and girls deserve a life free from violence. Although lack of public understanding about the prevalence and impacts of violence against women and girls makes the problem harder to solve, community sources believe awareness is growing. They note public discussions about safety and violence are occurring more frequently among legislators, service organizations, religious communities, male allies, and most importantly, among women and girls themselves.

Still, community sources cite the need for greater awareness and services in the four-county region, especially outside King County, which has developed a rich set of coordinated services to help women and girls threatened by violence. They highlighted the need for more school-based education to help young women and girls develop skills for dealing with safety and violence in their lives. Programs should be culturally competent, and available in multiple languages to serve women and girls with limited English proficiency.

Intimate-partner violence or domestic violence¹³⁰ refers to a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that one partner uses to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. It can include physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions, or threats of actions. It can also include behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone.

Sexual assault¹³¹ covers any type of sexual contact or behavior occurring without the explicit consent of the recipient. Activities such as forced sexual intercourse or rape, child molestation, incest, fondling, and attempted rape all fall under the definition of sexual assault.

Child abuse and neglect¹³² include any act, or failure to act, on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, exploitation, or an imminent risk of serious harm.

INTIMATE-PARTNER VIOLENCE

Intimate-partner violence, also referred to as domestic violence, is the leading cause of injury to women in the U.S.¹³⁷ Most victims fail to report these incidents, however. Reasons for not reporting violence include fear of retaliation from the perpetrator, financial dependence on the perpetrator, reluctance to prosecute an intimate partner, lack of money to obtain assistance, and/or cultural and language barriers.¹³⁸ Consequently, the number of incidents reported to law enforcement grossly underestimates the actual prevalence of intimate partner violence.¹³⁹

Self-report surveys more accurately assess the prevalence of violence in women’s lives. One such study, mentioned above, found almost half of women in Washington said they had experienced some form of physical or non-physical intimate partner violence (e.g., hitting, kicking, slapping, forced intercourse, sexual threats, or controlling behavior) in their lifetime. Six percent of these women reported experiencing intimate partner violence within the last year.¹⁴⁰

In another survey of Washington women 18 and older, 6 percent said that, at some point in their lives, an intimate partner had injured them in an incident of physical violence or unwanted sex.¹⁴¹ Despite differences in methods and definitions, both surveys suggest that well over one-third of women in Washington have experienced intimate-partner violence during their lifetime. Chart 21 shows the percentages of women in the four-county region who reported being injured by an intimate partner due to physical violence or unwanted sex in their lifetime.¹⁴²

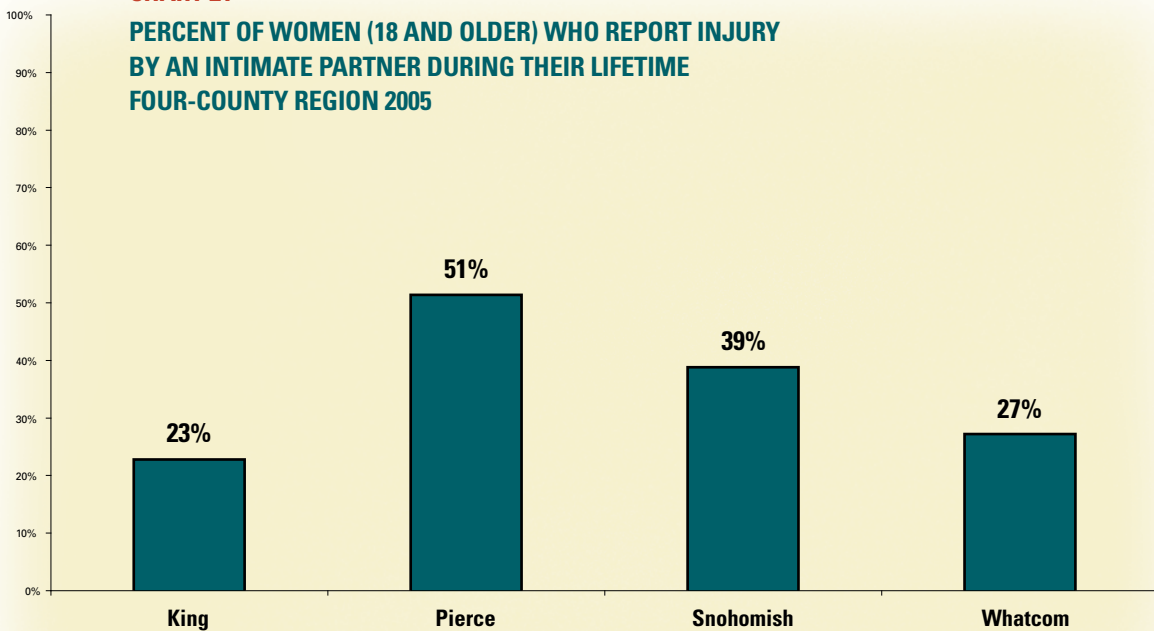
[My ex-husband]...stuck a gun in my mouth...and...threatened that, if I ever tried to leave him and if I did divorce him... [he would] take my kids...and... eventually get rid of me.”

~Focus Group Participant

In Pierce County, over half of women report being injured by an intimate partner in their lifetime, followed by 39 percent in Snohomish County, 27 percent in Whatcom County, and 23 percent in King County.

The patterns of violence against women and girls often start early in life. The lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence among girls under 18 is not available, but one in ten high school females in Washington reports that an intimate partner either limited her activities, threatened her, or made her feel unsafe in the last year. Six percent report being hit, slapped, or physically injured in the year prior to the survey.¹⁴³

CHART 21
PERCENT OF WOMEN (18 AND OLDER) WHO REPORT INJURY BY AN INTIMATE PARTNER DURING THEIR LIFETIME
FOUR-COUNTY REGION 2005



Source: Washington State Department of Health – Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System 2005
 Note: Percentages for Whatcom County should be interpreted with caution due to small sample size.

SEXUAL ASSAULT

As with intimate-partner violence, most sexual assaults against women and girls are underreported. Some estimates suggest as many as two-thirds of rapes and other forms of sexual assault are not reported to police.¹⁴⁴ Consequently, researchers turn to self-report surveys to find out how common sexual assault is among women.

A 2001 survey of Washington women found that, in their lifetime, over one-third (38 percent) have experienced some form of sexual assault (e.g., rape, attempted rape, indecent liberties, nonconsensual sex, and child molestation). The great majority of these assaults occurred during childhood, usually perpetrated by a parent or relative.

According to more recent data, 26 percent of women in Washington State report that, at least once in their lifetime, they were threatened with or forced to have unwanted sex.¹⁴⁵ The rate in Snohomish County is similar to that of the state as a whole; rates in King and Whatcom counties are slightly higher (29 percent), while Pierce County's rate is lower (19 percent) (Chart 22).

Only 15 percent of women in Washington report sexual assault to the authorities, and only half of these reports lead to charges against the perpetrator(s).¹⁴⁶ The most common reason for not reporting an assault to police was youth (being too young to know what to do), followed by shame, and uncertainty about the criminal nature of the assault.¹⁴⁷

CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

For some women and girls, intimate-partner violence results in serious injury or death. Fifty percent of all women murdered in Washington in 2005 were killed by their current or former boyfriend or husband; over the past decade, husbands or boyfriends (current or former) have murdered over 300 Washington women.¹⁵⁹

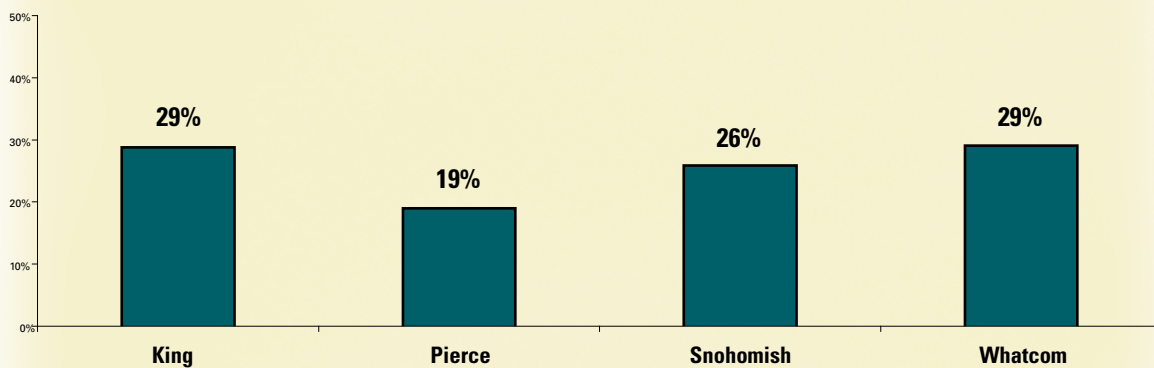
More commonly, intimate partner violence is not fatal, but can have enduring medical and social consequences. For example, victims often are less able to work productively and more likely to lose jobs and experience social isolation.¹⁶⁰ Victims of intimate-partner violence are also more likely than those without a history of such violence to engage in risky behaviors, such as smoking and recreational drug use.¹⁶¹ Women and girls who have experienced sexual assault are, over their lifetimes, six times as likely to meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder and more than three times as likely to meet the criteria for major depression as those without a history of sexual assault.^{162, 163}

Children living in households where intimate-partner violence occurs display more behavioral problems such as aggression, depression/anxiety, and hyperactivity than other children.¹⁶⁴

These behavioral issues carry into adulthood—female violent criminals are more likely than nonviolent criminals to have experienced physical and sexual abuse during childhood.¹⁶⁵ Violent girls also report higher rates of victimization and greater fear of sexual assault than non-violent girls.¹⁶⁶ Community sources working with victims of violence suggested that feelings of isolation and lack of resources for young women and girls experiencing violence in their homes contribute to this cycle of violence.

CHART 22

**PERCENT OF WOMEN (18 AND OLDER) WHO REPORT HAVING BEEN THREATENED OR FORCED TO HAVE UNWANTED SEX DURING THEIR LIFETIME
FOUR-COUNTY REGION 2005**



Source: Washington State Department of Health – Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System 2005
Note: Percentages for Whatcom County should be interpreted with caution due to small sample size.

SAFETY AND VIOLENCE ISSUES FOR IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

I am now a U.S. citizen...and I still feel scared.

– Focus Group Participant

Intimate-Partner Violence and Sexual Assault

Problems with physical abuse, sexual assault and rape, emotional abuse, control over economic resources, and isolation from family and friends are common among all groups of women. However, immigrant and refugee women and girls experience intimate-partner violence in ways that are unique to their foreign-born status. For example, these women report their abusers make threats based on immigration status, use minority status and lack of language competence against them, and pressure them to not seek help outside their community.¹⁴⁸ One community source described why threats based on immigration status are so effective:

If a woman is undocumented or dependent on her family or a man for documentation, that's going to be the obvious tool used by an abuser to control her....She's afraid, she'll get disowned by the family or shunned if she does anything against the offender, and...the offender holds the key to her future citizenship.

Immigrant women are more likely than women in the general population to die from domestic violence.¹⁴⁹ This disparity is probably related to immigrant women's inability to access services and information that could help protect them from abuse.¹⁵⁰ Community sources suggested that immigrant and refugee women and girls often fear accessing domestic violence, sexual assault, and other health and human service systems because of negative experiences with these systems. For undocumented women, fear of deportation can be a strong deterrent to seeking help. Lack of culturally and linguistically competent services compounds these difficulties.

Immigrant and refugee women and girls experiencing domestic violence often feel shame, confusion, and isolation within their communities.^{151,152} Also, they are often more economically dependent on their husbands and more socially isolated than women and girls born in the U.S.

A study in King County found that several factors weaken the ability of immigrant and refugee women and girls to address violence in their lives. Survivors of violence expressed “feelings of shame and humiliation, [a] belief that abuse is ‘normal,’ [and] a commitment to keeping the family together.” They also lacked economic resources, and often were unable to speak English.¹⁵³ Community sources echoed these findings, particularly the concerns about family. They commented that many immigrant and refugee women are reluctant to take their children and leave their abusive partners because that would mean “breaking up the family.” Furthermore, because of the stigma associated with violence in immigrant and refugee

communities, some women fear they will be shunned or disowned by their family and friends if they report that they are being abused.

Human Trafficking

A form of violence unique to immigrant and refugee communities is human trafficking.¹⁵⁴ In Washington, this practice gained attention in the 1990s with several high-profile cases of immigrant “mail-order brides” who had been held in servitude or murdered after arriving in the state. A recent *Seattle Weekly* article about a Moroccan teenager who was brought to Tacoma and held in servitude by her uncle shed light on the continued existence of this devastating threat to immigrant and refugee women in our region.¹⁵⁵

Washington's large immigrant community, long international border, and busy ports make the state a “triple threat” for trafficking.¹⁵⁶ Because of the clandestine nature of the crime, accurate statistics on the numbers and origins of people who are trafficked are difficult to obtain. Global data, however, indicate that young children and women comprise the majority of those exploited by trafficking; many of these victims arrive from highly impoverished countries.¹⁵⁷

The good news is that Washington continues to be a leader in combatting human trafficking. In 2002, it was the first state to pass anti-trafficking legislation and establish an anti-trafficking task force. And in early 2005, Washington again led other states by passing legislation aimed at improving the services available for victims of trafficking.¹⁵⁸

Civil Rights Violations and Harassment

Civil rights violations also pose unique threats to the safety of immigrant and refugee women and girls. Changes to immigration policy in the wake of 9/11, such as summary deportation and detainment (particularly for Muslim men and women), have had devastating effects on immigrant communities. Federal policies, such as the Patriot Act and the Homeland Security Act, negatively affect immigrant and refugee women and girls because, when male family members are taken away, women and girls often face increased economic challenges. Furthermore, diminished availability of visas following 9/11 has hurt family reunification efforts, often forcing women to endure long periods of separation from their families. Anti-immigrant sentiments—fostered by federal policies and public perceptions—increase harassment toward immigrant and refugee women and girls and threaten their economic security, emotional health, and safety.

BARRIERS TO OVERCOMING INTIMATE-PARTNER VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

Economic Hardship

While violence against women and girls occurs in all social and economic groups, data from Washington State suggest low-income women disproportionately experience all forms of intimate partner violence.¹⁶⁷ Lack of financial resources is one of the most common reasons domestic violence victims stay with or return to an abusive partner.¹⁶⁸ According to Washington's *Domestic Violence Fatality Review*, "in five of the ten (50%) recently reviewed cases involving adult domestic-violence victims, the victim was not employed at the time of the fatal incident. In four of those cases, the domestic violence victim had not been employed throughout her entire relationship with the abuser, and thus did not have an independent means to support herself or her children."¹⁶⁹

Community sources and focus group participants echoed the challenges low-income women and girls face in addressing violence in their lives. Women and girls who lack economic resources—including access to health services and affordable child care and housing—are more dependent on their abusive partners and, therefore, more vulnerable to violence. This risk extends to children, as economic stress and poverty amplify the difficulties of maintaining a safe family environment and diminish alternatives for families to safely escape abusive situations.

Stigma of Violence

Shame is one of the most commonly cited reasons for not reporting intimate-partner violence and sexual assault to authorities. According to community sources, society often blames women for the violence in their lives and stigmatizes those who remain in abusive relationships. Community sources maintained that these societal attitudes often keep women from reporting intimate-partner violence, as they fear the state Child Protective Services (CPS) will take their children away from them for "allowing" violence in their homes.

*My two oldest boys...
are also victims of domestic
violence. They have very
bad tempers. They've learned
that from their father.*

~Focus Group Participant

Vulnerable Populations

The consequences of violence and the need for services vary for different groups of women and girls. For example, community sources noted that elderly women experience unique vulnerabilities to violence due to physical limitations and increased risks for financial exploitation and self-neglect. Services to help women and girls escape violence often do not consider the needs of women over 50 years of age.

Differently-abled women and girls also experience violence in unique ways. Community sources stated that violence against this population of women and girls is "hidden," especially when offenders are caregivers who neglect them, abuse them physically or sexually, and/or take advantage of them financially. Differently-abled women and girls may need to communicate about these abusive experiences in ways that are tailored to their understanding and abilities. Finally, resources for vulnerable populations are sometimes limited. Traditional services, such as domestic-violence shelters, often do not have the capacity to manage the medical issues of women and girls who are differently abled.

Intimate-partner violence occurs in same-sex relationships at about an equal rate as in heterosexual couples.¹⁷⁰ However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered survivors face many unique challenges and barriers as they try to leave these relationships and get legal and emotional support. These include:

- Limited access to criminal and civil legal protection;
- Disenfranchisement from many parts of mainstream community life, including many faith congregations, civic groups, and "respectable" social institutions may limit LGBT survivors' social safety net;
- Increased vulnerability because the "coming out" process is often isolating, which may decrease support from one's family of origin and increase susceptibility to hate crimes;
- Lack of civil recognition for lesbian families and stigmatization of homosexuality make custody issues for children more challenging, which might lead someone to remain in an abusive situation;
- Lack of adequate response from institutions that are meant to help victims. "Even where law enforcement and other systems are working diligently to address systemic racism, classism and homophobia within their agencies—officers on the scene rarely have enough time, support or expertise to successfully determine who the primary aggressor is in same sex domestic or dating violence cases."¹⁷¹

Programs that successfully address same-sex violence integrate prevention, outreach, and direct-service programs to more holistically reflect the way marginalized communities experience and resist domestic violence.¹⁷²

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

In Washington, reported rates of child abuse, neglect, and fatalities typically fall below national averages. Among the 50 states, Washington has the fifth-lowest rate of child maltreatment.¹⁷³

Although girls have slightly higher rates of victimization than boys nationally, the rates for girls and boys are similar in Washington.¹⁷⁴

More than 79,000 referrals of suspected child abuse or neglect were reported to the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services in 2005. Of those, more than 36,000 met the legal definition of abuse or neglect under Washington State law and were investigated by the Children’s Administration.¹⁷⁵ In King County, the state Department of Social and Health Services investigated 25 cases of child maltreatment per 1,000 children (ages 0 to 17) in 2005, compared to 31, 33, and 50 cases per 1,000 children investigated in Pierce, Snohomish, and Whatcom counties, respectively.¹⁷⁶

As with intimate-partner violence and sexual assault, reports to authorities of child abuse and neglect probably grossly underestimate the actual amount of child maltreatment. Looking at self-report data, nearly one in five adolescents in Washington say they have been physically abused at some point in their lives by an adult.¹⁷⁷ Among Washington adults, men and women report similar rates of physical abuse in childhood (12 and 10

percent, respectively), but women are more than twice as likely as men to report sexual abuse in childhood (20 and 8 percent, respectively) (Chart 23).¹⁷⁸

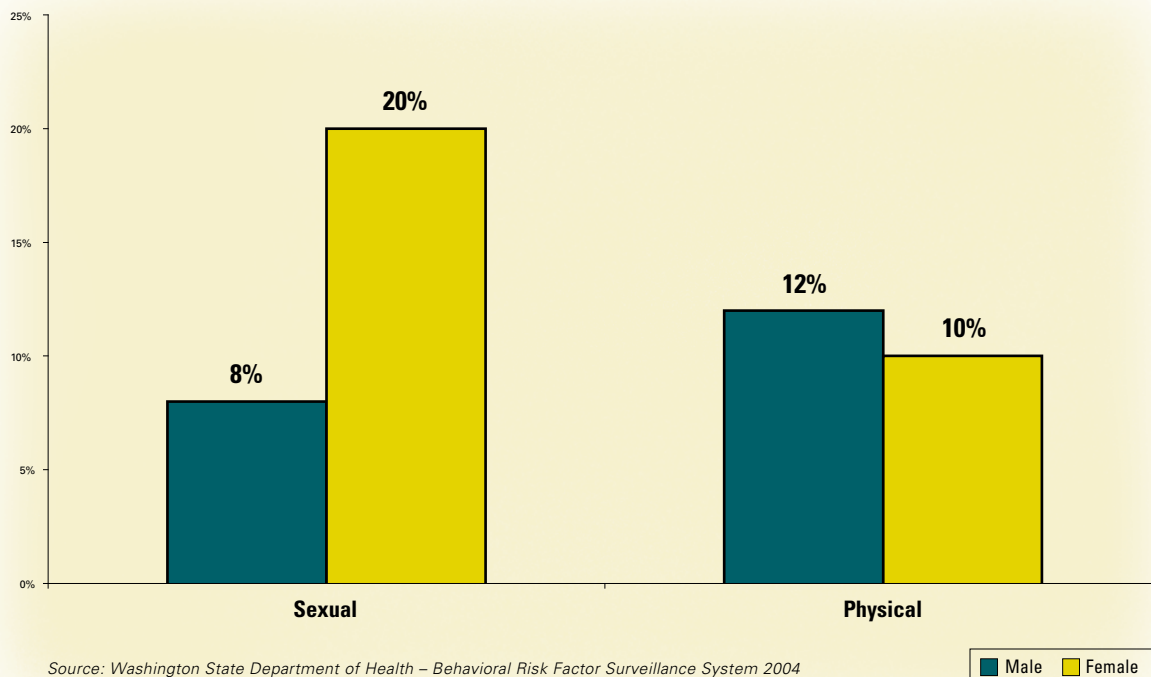
SCHOOL VIOLENCE: BULLYING AND GENDER-BASED HARASSMENT

Bullying at school has become a high-profile issue over the past few years. Recent reports suggest victims of bullying suffer psychologically, academically, physically, and socially.¹⁷⁹ A study conducted in King County found students who have been bullied are more likely than non-bullied students to report feeling unsafe at school, feeling sad or hopeless, and carrying a weapon to school for self-protection.¹⁸⁰

A significant proportion of middle school and high school students in Washington report being bullied “a lot or every day” in one or more of the following ways: name-calling or insults, telling rumors or lies, shoving or pushing, and/or threatening with physical harm. Nearly half of all students, regardless of grade, report being bullied occasionally.¹⁸¹

Female students report being bullied at approximately the same rate as males, though they are more likely than male students to be bullied on the basis of gender characteristics.¹⁸² Almost 50 percent of female students in King County report gender-specific bullying, compared to only 20 percent of male students.¹⁸³

CHART 23
ADULTS REPORTING A HISTORY OF PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL ABUSE AS A CHILD BY SEX
WASHINGTON STATE 2004



MOVING FORWARD

Community sources reported improvements in awareness and discussion about safety and violence for women and girls. To build on this momentum and the strength of existing efforts, they highlighted the following as ways that the criminal justice system, employers, service providers, advocates, and policy-makers might address the complex needs of women and girls who experience—or fear they will experience—violence in their lives.

Program and Service Improvements

- **Expand programs and services to address safety and violence issues** for women and girls. In all counties except King, the absence of coordinated programs and peer support impedes local efforts to sustain support against violence.
- **Increase pro-bono legal services to low-income women** trying to escape violence in their lives. Necessary legal services include help with child custody, property rights, and issues specific to immigrant and refugee women and girls.
- **Educate law-enforcement personnel and workers in the judicial system** to enhance their awareness and understanding of the complex service needs of women and girls who are victims of violence. Train these workers to facilitate coordinated services when possible.
- **Improve integration of the service system** by offering comprehensive and concurrent support services such as mental health counseling, peer-support groups, drug and alcohol treatment, health care, and other critical social and health services. Also, offer safety-and-violence training throughout the social service system.
- **Develop age-appropriate, culturally competent, and linguistically diverse** education and violence-prevention materials to meet the needs of Washington’s increasingly diverse population of women and girls.
- **Train service providers on how to respond to violence in same-sex relationships.**
- **Enhance transitional services** such as housing, job training, and child care arrangements to help women and girls work out safe and stable ways to leave violent and abusive relationships.
- **Offer school education and prevention programs for young women and girls** to improve their understanding of violence, empower them to address violent or abusive situations, and promote healthy behaviors in relationships.

Public Policy Considerations

- **Expand and sustain funding for the Violence Against Women Act**, which provides critical funding for violence-prevention programs for victims of domestic violence.
- **Advance policies that legally protect women from same-sex violence.**
- **Preserve and strengthen victims’ rights and strengthen the role of advocates** in helping women and girls navigate the law-enforcement and judicial systems.
- **Support passage of the Elder Justice Act**, which would fund research and services to address elder abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
- **Mandate that institutions and employers have “open-door policies”** for women and girls to report abuse, harassment, or violent behavior.

A lot of times, a mother will be blamed for allowing violence to happen to her....It’s going to make a victim of domestic violence think twice about [accessing services].

~Community Source

Strategies for Social Change

- **Develop public-awareness campaigns** to reduce the stigma of violence and enhance public understanding of the complexities confronting women and girls who try to escape violent or abusive situations.
- **Engage men in discussions of violence against women and girls.** Involving men—and community partners such as businesses, schools, and faith-based organizations—can broaden understanding and deepen public commitment to dealing with these problems.
- **Create awareness that domestic violence is a deeper manifestation of power and dominance in our culture, not just a result of sexism.** All forms of oppression—racism, classism, homophobia, discrimination against physically and developmentally disabled individuals—marginalize women and girls and make them vulnerable to violence. To effectively curb the prevalence of violence against women and girls, oppression in all forms must be addressed.