

You Are Not Alone

A Booklet for Women Facing Violence in Afghanistan

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This book is dedicated to the resilient women of Afghanistan and
our sisters around the world.

Dear Sisters,

Thank you for finding and reading this booklet. Through these pages, hundreds of women across Afghanistan want to reach out and tell you that you are not alone. We write today because, like you, we are either survivors of violence ourselves or we know and love someone who has survived or continues to face violence.

Through this booklet, we share our communal knowledge as survivors of violence, and as activists, writers, and supporters of every woman's right to be free from abuse. Here you will learn about the types of gender-based violence, why violence against women happens, and how you can protect yourselves and your loved ones from it. We will share stories inspired by the lives of women we've met through Free Women Writers in the past four years and the lessons learned from their struggles for freedom and safety. We will also debunk the many myths that continue to surround conversations on gender-based violence and harm women around the world. We also provide specific and practical tips on ways you can deal with the violence you or someone you love may be facing.

Some parts of this booklet can trigger you into remembering the violence you or your loved ones have faced and may cause further trauma. Please be advised to read with caution and be mindful of your mental health. If you fear that you will face depression or a traumatic episode as a result of reading this booklet, please take appropriate breaks or read with a supportive friend.

We write so that we all have a deeper and clearer understanding of gender-based violence because if we don't recognize the roots of this problem, we cannot end it. Most importantly, we write to reassure you that if you are a survivor of violence, it is not your fault. You do not deserve to live in violence. You did not do anything to cause it. You are not responsible for the actions of your abuser. You have the right to live happily and to feel loved, cherished, and respected. You are not defined by the violence you have faced or continue to face. **You are a whole human being born with the undeniable right to have control over your own body and live a life without physical, sexualized, or emotional violence and intimidation. And you are not alone.**

With love and solidarity,

Free Women Writers

What is gender-based violence?

Amir and Tahmina were neighbors. They grew up playing with each other until Tahmina reached puberty and was not allowed to go outside the house as often. Amir was also told that he was too old to play with girls and he should work with his father in his grocery store and fly kites with the boys. Still, they sometimes said “hello” to each other when Tahmina was on the way to school and once Amir slipped Tahmina a love letter when she was in the eleventh grade. They thought about each other a lot. When she graduated high school, Amir sent his family to ask for her hand and within a year, they were married. Growing up with dreams of being together and loving one another, Amir and Tahmina imagined a life of happiness. Within a few months of their marriage, Amir and Tahmina started having disagreements. They didn’t have a child and Amir and his family blamed Tahmina. During their conversations, Amir rarely gave Tahmina the chance to speak. Things got worse when they had a big fight and Amir raised his voice and told Tahmina that she was worthless to him if she couldn’t give him a son. Amir’s family also made hurtful comments about Tahmina. They said that they had wasted their handsome young son on her. After a while, Amir began spending nights away from home and whenever he came back he made excuses to beat and berate Tahmina. Overtime, Tahmina grew depressed. She didn’t understand why Amir had become violent. She often thought that if she could have a child their problems would be over and they would return to the good days.

Tahmina is facing gender-based violence, which is physical, verbal, emotional, or sexualized violence and intimidation because of her gender and societal gender roles. What does that mean? Every community has a set of gender roles that are widely accepted. In our communities, they include things like women should stay at home and take care of children and men should provide for their families. Often in societies where one gendered group (usually men) has more power than others, that group ends up with more power and freedom than the others. When the marginalized groups (those with less power) deviate from gender roles defined by society, they often face violence.

However, women face violence even if they don’t deviate from gender roles and simply because those who abuse women don’t see them as deserving of respect. This is why violence against women is gender-based. We face it either because we are women (Amir didn’t face any violence for not having children, but Tahmina did) or because we have broken the unjust and often informal laws of gender in our communities (in Tahmina’s case, not having a child) or because of both.

While around the world, abusive men inflict the vast majority of violence against women (including femicide, early marriage, prevention of education, etc.), it is important to remember that some women can also be abusive towards other women. These women participate in violence against other women either to establish their own superiority, to please the male heads of households, or because they too don’t respect women or value women’s lives and think women deserve violence.

Gender-based violence doesn't only impact women. When a boy is beaten up or bullied for crying, that is also gender-based violence. When a man is shamed for not being able to provide for his family, this is also gender-based violence. However, the majority of gender-based violence harms women and the harm women face due to gender-based violence is often more deadly and intense. In fact, one in three women around the world have faced physical or sexualized violence. If we include street harassment and verbal and emotional violence, nearly every woman on earth has faced some kind of violence.

The statistics are staggering in Afghanistan. 87 percent of Afghan women - that is nearly nine out of ten - have said they have faced some kind of physical or sexualized violence. It is important to remember that these are not faceless, nameless victims. You and I are probably included in this statistic. Women who have faced violence and continue to face it are like you and me, and we all deserve to live free from it. This is why it is important to talk about **what causes violence**.

After months of violence, Tahmina came to believe that if they had a child, her husband would return to his kind ways. However, if we take a deeper look at Tahmina's story, we will see that the violence started before the physical abuse and the root cause of it is not the lack of children in the family.

Remember when Tahmina and Amir started to have conversations about their problem. Amir didn't listen to Tahmina's voice. Later, during one of their fights he called her "worthless". In addition, he didn't prevent his family from saying harsh things to Tahmina and he never checked to see if the infertility problem might be with himself. He assumed it was Tahmina's fault and blamed her for it. These are all examples of emotional and verbal abuse. The cause of violence is not that they don't have a child, but rather that Amir thinks it is Tahmina's job to bring a child to the world and assumes that they are failing because of her. He sees Tahmina as worthless and her voice as less important than his. He respects Tahmina as a tool for reproduction, not as a human being, and doesn't pay attention to her needs.

Tahmina, like most survivors of violence, blames herself and believes that if she can fix what Amir and his family sees as a shortcoming on her part, their life will be free of violence. As women, our society teaches us to do this from a young age. Even if we get harassed when we are young girls of seven or eight, our parents and people around us often tell us it is because we did something wrong. Rarely, is the blame for bad behavior by men placed on men. Rather, it is assumed that women drive men to express lust, anger, or violence. The reality is different. Men are autonomous beings with the ability to decide for themselves and abusive men are thoroughly aware of their actions and impact on others.

Here are some myths about what causes violence:

Anger: Many believe that abusers are only violent when they lose control or something makes them angry. Based on this point of view, the person facing abuse can prevent it from happening by not making the abuser angry. This is not true. An abuser puts a lot of thought into planning his violent behavior. He is often pleasant and loving in front of others and violent in private. He thinks consciously and strategically about what kind of violence to use at which occasion and he is able to stop being violent if something sudden happens, if there is something knocking at the door, for example.

When an abuser raises his hand over you and not over the man who harasses you, he is making a decision. The fact that he chooses to direct his anger towards you shows that he is capable of making a decision and he has not just lost control. When an abuser waits until you are alone with him and then harms you physically or mentally, he is aware of what he is doing. When he chooses to humiliate you in front of others, he is still making a choice. Like everyone else, abusers also have the power to control their behavior and not choose violence.

Addiction: Some argue that alcoholism or addiction to other drugs cause abuse. While alcohol or other drugs can make violence more intense in some cases, addiction is not the root cause of violence. There are many people who consume drugs but are not violent and there are many who don't consume drugs but are violent.

Stress: Like anger, everyone experience stress. There are many healthy ways of dealing with stress and there are even unhealthy ways of dealing with stress that don't necessarily harm others. Some abusers say that when they come home after a stressful day at work, it is hard to control their abusive behavior. However, survivors also work hard and can get stressed. Stress is neither an excuse nor a root cause of violence.

Abused people abuse people: Some argue that those who have faced violence during childhood are more likely to grow up and become abusers themselves. However, research shows that many victims of abuse feel sympathy and solidarity with other victims. Abusers often have a role model who is abusive. For example, if a father is abusive towards his wife, his son is also likely to be violent towards his wife because he has learned from a role model (boys look up to their fathers more than their mothers) that that is acceptable treatment of women. However, there are many exceptions to this and not all children of abusive men grow up to become abusers.

Poverty: Unemployment and poverty are also cited as excuses or reasons for poverty, but around the world women face similar levels of violence in households with wealth and those in poverty. Violence, in different forms, persists whether we are in rural villages or in large cities. Abusive behavior can look different based on the setting and background, but the degree and prevalence of violence is roughly the same across socio-economic classes.

Love: We've all heard this one. "If he didn't love you, he wouldn't care." "He gets angry because he loves you." "He is jealous because he loves you." These are all misperceptions. Control is not love. Jealousy is not love. Violence is not love. We all love people. When we love, we try our best never to harm them. If someone knowingly harms you, he doesn't love you.

Violence is caused by a set of beliefs, not emotions, feelings, or circumstances. The root cause of violence against women is an abuser's belief that women are unworthy of respect, and that they have ownership over and are superior to women. Abusers often don't see women as worthy of the same rights and respect as themselves. They tend to think that their feelings and experiences are more important than that of women and women exist to serve them or take care of them. It is this lack of respect towards women that allows abusers to be violent towards the women closest to them. We know that if you respect someone, you will not be violent towards them. The cause of abuse is abusers, not you and not your circumstances. It is never your fault. You never deserve violence.

While beliefs about women's rights, personhood, and value tend to be the cause of violence, external factors are often what sustain violence. An imbalance of power between men and women in society leads to abusers feeling safe when they abuse women. Because women don't have the same degree of social, economic, and political power, abusers know that there will be few, if any, repercussions for the violence they inflict. Harassment and corruption within the legal system and unjust laws contribute to women not speaking out and to abusers feeling emboldened.

Some argue that abusers continue to abuse because women who face violence don't speak up. This is often untrue. Many women who face violence do object to violence and try to defend themselves, albeit sometimes in small ways such as seeking help from community elders. The lack of societal and legal repercussions, however, embolden the abuser to continue the abuse knowing that nearly no one will listen to an abused woman and many might blame her for her own oppression.

There are also many women who don't speak up against the violence they face at home. This is probably because they are afraid of further violence, they are financially dependent on their abuser(s), or they may even be unaware of the fact that they are facing violence. We cannot blame women for their silence, as we don't know their circumstances and the threats they may face. **The people to blame are the abusers who threaten and intimidate women, prevent women from financial independence, and emotionally manipulate women and isolate them so that they can't recognize violence.**

Another major contributor to the sustenance of violence is the isolation of abused women. Abusers often prevent their victims from speaking to others about violence, from going to women's meetings, or even visiting their friends and families. Many abusers go out of their way to ruin the woman's relationships with her friends and

support systems so that she feels alone and isolated. This helps the abuser maintain control and ensure that the woman will not tell anyone about the abuse she is facing at home. In isolation and without reassurance and support from others, it is easy for the abuser to manipulate her into thinking that she is not facing abuse at all and it is all in her head, or that abuse is normal and acceptable, or that she is to blame for the violence she faces.

We see this cycle of violence break when women connect with other survivors of violence and hear each other's stories. Then, we know that we are not alone and it wasn't our fault. Then, we learn that nearly all women around us have faced some kind of violence and there is no way every one of us is the cause of the violence she has faced. It is often in the stories and reflections of other survivors that we learn the patterns and trends in abuse and see the way an abuser's mind works and how abusers manipulate us into feeling shame and blaming ourselves.

How to recognize an abusive man?

- If he humiliates, harasses, or insults you or other women, especially his former romantic partners and female friends and colleagues. Remember, abuse is rooted in disrespect towards women.
- If he goes out of his way to show to everyone around you that he is nice and loving to you and he doesn't show you appreciation in private. If he is extra-nice or even claims to be a "feminist" but treats you badly in private, he is making sure people around you won't believe it if you say he is abusive.
- If he tries to control your whereabouts, clothes, behaviors, and communications with others. A good partner respects your boundaries and your right over your body and doesn't try to control you or separate you from friends and family.
- If he is always jealous or accuses you of infidelity for no justifiable reason. A good partner trusts you and doesn't feel ownership over you.
- If he doesn't take responsibility for his actions and blames you for all disagreements and "failures" at home.
- If he puts his own comfort before your needs, for example if you are sick and he still insists that you must have sex with him or make food for him. Abusive men are often self-centered.
- If he threatens you with violence, defamation, or abandonment.
- If he prevents you from having friendships or spending time with your friends and family. Abusive men want to have a monopoly over your time and make sure you are isolated so you can't tell anyone about what is going on between you.

- If he has double standards for himself and you. For example, if he thinks it is okay for him to sleep until noon, but you must get up early to do laundry, clean the house, and prepare food, or if he thinks it is okay for him to stay out late, but doesn't allow you the same choice.
- If he does favors for you only to throw them back at you when you get into a disagreement. For example, if he says, "Why did I buy you that amazing watch if you won't listen to my requests or have sex with me?" Abusive men often think of doing their part at home as a favor they are doing for you and assume that you have to pay them back for it.

It is important to remember that any man showing one of these signs once may not be an abuser, but these are some early warnings. If you see these signs in a partner or a friend, proceed with caution and make sure to make it clear from the beginning that you are not okay with their behavior. Most importantly, trust your instinct. If your gut feeling tells you that something is not right, believe it. After living in patriarchal societies where we are regularly exposed to violence or abuse, we, women, have developed really strong instincts when it comes to violence. We will learn more ways to protect ourselves from violence in the coming pages.

Check “yes” if you have ever experienced any of the following:

- Has he ever broken things around the house, thrown items at you, or punched walls to intimidate you?
- Has he ever locked you inside the house?
- Has he ever refused you food or water?
- Has he ever raised his hand but not hit you?
- Has he ever threatened to hurt you, your children, or your family members?
- Has he ever called you a “slut” or accused you of adultery?
- Has he ever threatened to take you to the police or legal medical center to check your virginity?
- Has he ever enticed others, his or your family members, to beat you or “get you in line”?
- Has he ever used his need for alcohol or drugs as an excuse to sell your possessions?
- Has he ever forced you into ending friendships because of him?
- Has he ever taken your money or other possessions from you by force, made you close your bank account, or leave jobs and opportunities?
- Has he ever forced you into having sex? Whether you are married or not is irrelevant because forcing someone into physical intimacy is never acceptable.
- Has he ever threatened to leave you or not give you money for home necessities if you don’t do as he says?

If your answer to any of the above is “yes” then you’ve already faced physical, sexualized, financial, or verbal abuse.

Now that we know some of the signs of abuse, here are some tips for taking precautions to avoid abusers when possible. It is important to remember that if you face violence, it is not your fault. It is entirely possible to follow all of these tips and still end up married to an abusive person or into an abusive family. It is also possible to not follow these tips and be surrounded with people who love and respect you. These tips are specifically for women considering a relationship or a marriage but can be useful to everyone.

Prioritize your education before marriage and say no to early and forced marriage. If you truly love someone and think you are ready for marriage, make sure you have completed high school and if possible university. The person who loves you will wait for you. If you are facing early or forced marriage, speak up against it. Don't be shy. It is your human, legal, and religious right to make your voice heard. It might be a good idea to first tell someone in the family that you trust and you think will support you and then tell the elders together. It is always easier if someone else supports you. It also helps if you can tell stories of women around you and how forced marriage has ruined their lives. Most forced and early marriages lead to pregnancy complications, mental illnesses, further violence, and a lifetime of fights and disagreements. Articulate this to your family to help prevent being forced into marriage.

Invest in your economic independence before marriage. For many women, this is not a possibility. In our society, it is still largely frowned upon for women to go to university or to work outside the house. Opportunities are also scarce. In addition, women who work at home are also working women. They are contributing to their family's economy by preventing the need for hired labor for cooking, cleaning, laundry, childcare, etc. Their work is as valuable as those who work outside the home. Regardless of whether she has an income or not, no woman deserves abuse. However, being financially dependent on their abusers prevents many women from leaving violent relationships. It is important therefore to learn skills and find venues for employment before and after marriage. Before marriage, make sure your future partner knows that you value your job and that you'll agree to the marriage on the condition of being able to continue your work and education.

Create a personal bank account that only you have access to. If there are no banks around you and this is not a possibility, save money in a secret place. Having some money of your own can make you less vulnerable to tolerating violence and give you the option to seek help from doctors or mental health professionals if the need arises.

Learn about your rights. Whether it is through booklets like this or attending seminars or listening to radio shows, prepare yourself with knowledge. Know that forced marriage and early marriage is violence and nearly all forms of violence against women, including physical and sexualized violence, forced sex work, abandonment, verbal abuse, stalking, preventing and access to inheritance are illegal. The Elimination

of Violence against Women Act is the law of the land and you can access it online or through a local women's rights organization.

Take the time to know your future partner. If circumstances allow, spend time with your future husband. Think about the signs of violence and learn about his habits, thoughts, and beliefs. See how he treats and speak about other women and what his views are on women's employment, education and independence. If you notice any troubling trends, depending on how concerned you are, speak with him or reconsider your options. If you can't directly speak with him before marriage, talk to your parents and let them know what you are looking for in a partner. Be sure to explain to them why this matters, and what you are trying to avoid. If you need to, educate your family on your rights using the resources listed above or the stories of other women in your community. Say things like, "Notice how so-and-so is miserable and returning to her parents' house every couple months because of violence? I don't want to live like that." Appeal to your family's emotions. Remind them that they love you and care about you and that marrying someone you don't know or someone who could be abusive is not what they want for you, either.

Be proactive in your *nekah* (religious wedding ceremony) process. Many women can save themselves from a life of heartache by making sure their *nekah* is progressive. Communicate with your father or whoever else is your *wakil* (advocate) to include equal rights to divorce and custody in your *nekah khat* (marriage certificate). Some religious leaders will allow this. And make sure that your *nekah khat* doesn't include things like "the wife can't leave the home without husband's permission". Often sexist clauses like this are included in the *nekah khat* to prevent you from accessing your rights. In Afghanistan, your *nekah khat* is your legal document. Try to negotiate its contents upfront. If you are not able to change or improve the *nekah khat*, discuss things like custody, divorce, property rights, and when and if you want to have children with your partner beforehand. Some of these things are not pleasant to speak about, but they can help you ensure you are on the same page and make it easier to advocate for yourself in the long run. A number of women don't talk about these issues openly because they want to be viewed as virtuous and bashful, however having a life filled with love and safety is more important than society's perception of you.

Delay having children if you can. Afghanistan's custody laws make it nearly impossible for women to have custody over their children. If you don't have the opportunity to get to know your husband before marriage, delay childbirth after marriage. Once you know your husband and can trust him not to be abusive, you can plan on having children.

Arezo is a nurse. She has been working outside the house since she graduated from university and her parents have been supportive of her right to work. A few months ago, Jamshid, Arezo's brother came back from Iran and has loudly advocated against Arezo working in the local hospital. He goes out of his way to create more house work for Arezo in the morning so she gets to work late and he often talks to their other three bothers about how women have no business working outside the home and interacting with men. Arezo likes being economically independent and truly loves her job. She finds joy in helping other women.

Over time, Jamshid's rants against Arezo turn scary. One day, when she comes home from work, he throws a shovel towards her. The shovel doesn't hit Arezo but it scares her. Jamshid then calls her a "slut who goes out, God knows doing what." Arezo talks to her parents about the incident and they promise to talk to Jamshid and put an end to his behavior. A few days later, Jamshid apologizes. Arezo thinks the problem is solved, however she notices Jamshid still talking to their brothers about Arezo's work and telling them that she is not a "proper woman."

One day, Arezo's young brother tells her that Jamshid has threatened to kill her if she continues to work. Arezo becomes terrified for her life and avoids her brother until one day she comes home and notices everyone but Jamshid has gone to a party. When he sees her, Jamshid grabs Arezo by the hair and drags her on the floor and beats her up. Then he tells her that if she continues working or tells anyone, he will kill her.

What are some signs of abuse in this story? When did physical violence begin?

The first sign of abuse is Jamshid insisting that Arezo shouldn't work. He is trying to control her and keep her at home. The second sign of abuse is him speaking with other siblings and trying to change their minds about Arezo's right to work. He is trying to isolate her.

The first act of physical violence, however, is when he throws a shovel at her. It is true that the shovel doesn't hit her, but it is a violent act because it is a threat that next time the shovel could harm her. Remember that physical violence doesn't have to be carried out for women to feel traumatized and scared. Threats of physical violence and murder can lead to some of the same traumas and fears that actual physical violence leads to. Of course, in this story, the physical violence escalates at the end when Jamshid brutalizes Arezo.

Arezo faces intense physical violence, but rarely does anyone face only one kind of violence. Usually even physical violence is accompanied with verbal and emotional violence, like the insults, silencing, and isolation that Jamshid condemns Arezo to. In fact, more than half of survivors of physical violence say that it was harder to overcome the emotional abuse they faced. In addition, Arezo faces financial abuse, because Jamshid threatens to take away her source of income. Lack of income often makes women dependent on the support of their abusers and continues the cycle of violence.

Hawa and Asad are classmates at the university. The two of them do homework, eat lunch, and spend time outside of the university together. They feel romantically and emotionally attached to one another. One day when he is dropping her at home after an event, Asad puts his hand on Hawa's leg. Hawa moves his hand away and says that she is not interested in having sexual relations of any kind before marriage. Asad apologizes but a few days later, he tries to touch her again. He says that he has needs and it is impossible for him to control himself around her because she is so attractive. He says, "If you don't want me to be aroused, dress more conservatively." Hawa decides to wear baggier clothes and tries not to bring attention to herself in class and outside. Suddenly, she grows quiet. People around her begin to wonder why her behavior has changed so much. She still spends time with Asad, but after he tries to kiss her one evening, she pushes him away and tells him to stop it. Asad tells her that if she can't fulfill his needs, they can't be together. Hawa lets him kiss her and then leaves, but she feels guilty, dirty, and hurt. She loves Asad but she doesn't feel safe with him anymore. She also knows that her family doesn't approve of her love and wonders who she can speak with about her problem.

Sakhi is forty-five years old. He is married to Frozan and they have three children. Even though they have been married for more than twenty years, Frozan never feels comfortable with Sakhi in bed. He often watches porn and forces her to watch it with him. He even pressures her to act out the things he sees on screen. Sometimes, he makes comments about how Frozan is not as attractive as other women. If Frozan refuses to participate in a sexual act he suggests, he says he is hurt and doesn't talk to her for a few days until Frozan feels sorry and apologizes to him. He also pressures Frozan into sex when she is sick, tired, or not in the mood and tells her that this is her only job as his wife and she should fulfill her duties. Sometimes he pulls her hair too hard or hurts her when they are intimate and doesn't stop even when she asks him to. Outside of the bedroom, and especially in front of others, sakhi is kind to Frozan and praises her for being a good mother. Frozan often feels unsafe and dirty after she has been intimate with her husband and rarely feels confident in her body. As a result, she feels depressed, unsafe, and inadequate.

Fereshta is nine years old. She lives next door to her uncle's house. She is friends with her cousin, Hadia, and they often play games and watch TV at their house. One night, she falls asleep at her cousin's house. In the morning, she jolts up when she feels somebody's hands running up her legs. She opens her eyes and sees Hadia's older brother, Omaid. When he notices that Fereshta is awake, Omaid acts like nothing happened and leaves the room. After some days, she sees that Omaid doesn't show any guilt or make any comments and she really begins to think the whole thing was a dream. Still, she feels unsafe around him and sometimes sees him looking at her in an uncomfortable way. Fereshta feels violated but doesn't know how to describe her feelings. She feels sad, unsafe, and alone because she feels like she can't talk to anyone about what happened and she doesn't understand why it happened.

Hawa, Frozan and Fereshta have all faced sexualized abuse. **Sexualized abuse is imposed sexual activity and it can take many forms.** Groping or other forms of non-consensual touching in public spaces or workplaces, rape (any sex without consent), sexual harassment, trafficking, forced sex work, under-age and forced marriage, and incest are all forms of sexualized violence. Forcing someone to watch porn or consume other sexually degrading media and making unwanted sexual comments is also sexualized abuse.

Although Hawa, Frozan and Fereshta are facing different forms of sexual harassment and violence and live in different circumstances, there are many commonalities in their experiences. In patriarchal societies like ours, women are more likely to be blamed for the sexualized abuse they've faced and this often forces survivors into silence. Because of social stigma attached to sexualized abuse and because they are afraid to be blamed for the abuse they've faced, our three survivors remain silent. However not seeking emotional support and bottling up one's pain can lead to long-term trauma.

All three, Hawa, Frozan and Fereshta, are traumatized by the abuse they experienced. Feeling unsafe, ashamed, guilty, depressed, suicidal, dirty, and isolated are some of the symptoms of trauma. Some survivors may also lose interest in sexual intimacy, develop fear of men, engage in self-destructive behavior, or experience denial, insomnia or nightmares, shock, memory loss, flash backs, and anxiety. These symptoms and feelings are unfortunately extremely common among survivors of sexualized violence and can be exasperated if one feels like she can speak with others about her experience or faces victim-blaming if she does.

Regardless of who commits it or who faces it, sexualized abuse and violence is never excusable. A man who truly loves and respects you, will respect your boundaries and understand that your body belongs to you and you alone can decide whether or not to share access to it. All sexual contact and intimacy must be consensual. Excuses such as unfulfilled sexual needs or women's attire (Asad), marital responsibilities (Sakhi), or sleeping over at his house (Omaid), are not acceptable. All these excuses assume that abusers are not capable of controlling their urges and that women make it possible, convenient, or even acceptable for abuse to happen, but the reality is that abusers are fully capable of controlling themselves and respecting women.

Sexualized violence has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with power. There is a widely-accepted misconception that those who commit sexualized violence and abuse do it to fulfill their sexual needs, however research from different contexts, from war-torn countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo to peaceful ones like Norway, show that abusers are driven and fulfilled by power and control, not desire. At the heart of sexualized abuse is the desire to prove one's control over another's body. This desire sometimes stems from a feeling of entitlement to another person's body or feeling that they are one's property. Sexualized abuse is also seen as a form of punishment for any "transgressions" committed by women. For example,

some men engage in street harassment to punish women who they think are not dressed appropriately. During the civil war in Afghanistan, women who went to schools or universities were “punished” by warlords through kidnapping, rapes, and cutting of sexual body parts. In Bosnia and Kosovo, women faced sexualized violence and rape as a means for men of different ethnic groups to insult each other so women’s bodies were literally turned into battlegrounds. In Middle East and North Africa, research has shown that 90 percent of men who admit to harassing women said they engaged in this behavior for fun- not because it fulfills some kind of sexual desire. Perpetrators of sexualized violence and abuse are also not all “sexually deprived single men who can’t afford to get married.” Men of all economic and social classes and marital status engaged in sexually abusive behavior. In addition, sex is enjoyable for all parties when it is consensual and participatory.

Sexualized violence and abuse is never the fault of the survivor. The only person to blame is the abuser. When we make excuses for abuse or tell women to live their lives differently to avoid sexualized violence, we are agreeing with the sexist belief that men can’t be trusted with themselves. This line of thinking protects abusers. Instead, we must listen to and believe survivors and hold abusers accountable. There are many women who have been raped in their own homes. There are many women who have been raped while wearing burqas. There are many girls who have been raped before reaching puberty. For as long as there are no consequences for abuse and women, not abusers, are marginalized, shamed, and punished, for facing sexualized violence and abuse, violence and abuse will continue. Generation after generation our daughters will quiver and live in fear of abuse never fully trusting themselves and never living to the fullest, and our sons will never be able to see themselves as strong and able to control their urges. They will continue to find reasons to fail in being decent human beings capable of respecting others.

In Afghanistan and many other parts of the world, our language around sexualized violence shames and blames survivors. The words we use to describe those facing sexualized violence are incredibly important. When we say that someone who has been raped has lost her *ezat*/dignity and has become “*be-ezat*” or “*badnaam*”, we further marginalize the person who has faced violence. In reality, the person who loses their dignity, respect, and reputation after rape should be the rapist/s, not the survivor/s. Rape doesn’t take away a part or piece of you and it doesn’t make *you* less dignified. You are still a whole human being with rights, dignity, worth, and respect, after rape and other forms of sexualized violence.

Simin and Farhad have been engaged for more than a year. Farhad is based in Germany and Simin in Kabul. Their parents arranged their engagement because Farhad was interested in marrying someone who shares his culture. Simin's parents were also happy about the arrangement because it would allow her to live in a peaceful country after marriage. The young couple met once during the engagement party and since then they've been communicating on the phone nearly daily. While at the beginning, Farhad was kind and loving with Simin, lately their conversations have taken a terrible turn. He often says that he regrets getting engaged to her but he is now stuck because of their families. He calls her "ugly" and compares her to the women he interacts with at his university. Sometimes, after Simin tells him that he is being mean, he doesn't call her for days and Simin can't call him because she can't afford the international calls. Farhad tells Simin that if he wasn't overly-kind and worried about Simin's reputation, he would have already left her and warns her to be in her best behavior and take care of "her body and look better" when she joins him in Germany. When Simin mentions talking to their families and breaking off the engagement, Farhad says that no one will ever love Simin or take her after this engagement and now she is tainted forever. He tells Simin that she should be grateful they are getting married and she can leave Afghanistan. On the other hand, he never updates Simin on the status of her immigration process and avoids the conversation when it is brought up. Simin feels sad, abandoned, disrespected, and lost.

Simin is facing emotional abuse, which includes **any act including isolation, verbal assault, humiliation, emotional blackmail, intimidation or threats that may harm one's sense of identity, self-worth, and dignity.** Despite living in different continents, Farhad attacks Simin's self-confidence and consistently makes her feel worthless, but that is not all of the abuse he is inflicting on her. By silent-treating her, threatening her with abandonment, telling her that she will never be loved by anyone else, and not sharing important life-decisions and information, Farhad is making sure that Simin feels dependent on him and will not seek freedom from this engagement. In addition, although the engagement was consensual and Farhad had come to seek her hand, he often implies that he is doing Simin a favor and she should be thankful. In a healthy relationship, both sides respect each other instead of making one another feel inferior or like a burden. Cutting Simin off and making her feel guilty about standing up to abuse is also emotional blackmail. All these actions are abuse because they harm Simin's emotional health and are intended to do so. In order to have control over Simin's life, Farhad makes her feel lonely, dependent, and disempowered.

Despite being largely invisible, **emotional abuse can lead to lifelong emotional trauma and problems such as depression, anxiety, fear of abandonment, lack of self-esteem, and emotional dependence.** Lack of self-esteem and confidence as a result of emotional abuse can also prevent women from leaving physically and sexually abusive relationships. In addition, at the heart of emotional abuse lies lack of respect. **If one doesn't respect you, over time the emotional abuse can and often does lead to sexualized and physical abuse as well.**

Trust yourself. If you are facing abuse of any kind, the most important thing to remember is to trust your own instincts. No one knows you and your situation as well as you do. At every point evaluate your situation and recognize how you feel. Do you feel safe? Are you happy? Do you need support? Are you in physical danger? Are you feeling depressed? Do you have suicidal thoughts? Survey your emotional and physical health and make the decisions that feel right to you. As women in a patriarchal and violent world, we've learned to read signs and behaviors from a very young age. We know what kind of touch feels fine and what touch makes us feel unsafe. We know which comments are really compliments and which ones are threats. Deep in our heart, we know when we don't feel respected. Trust that. The abuse you are facing is not in your head. You are not imagining it. If you feel unsafe, there is nearly always a real reason for it.

Never blame yourself. Abuse is never the survivor's fault. We know that our communities often blame women for abuse and it is hard to unlearn that, however when we make any type of excuse for abuse, we empower the abuser and give him yet another weapon against those facing violence. If you're surrounded by an abusive person, you will face abuse no matter what you do. Making better food, having more sons, being more obedient, dressing more conservatively, cutting your friends and families out of your life, staying at home... none of these will stop the violence you face. These are mere excuses for and not the causes of violence. The cause of abuse is the mentality of the abuser who feels entitled to your body and to your life. Until he learns to respect not only you - but all women - as full human beings with equal rights and as deserving of the same dignity as himself, the abuse will continue under different excuses and in different shapes.

The following tips are based on our experiences and the experiences of women we've worked and spoken with over time. Feel free to adjust them based on your needs and situation.

Seek networks of support. Abuse thrives on isolating women. Abusers consciously and systematically destroy the survivor's support systems and networks. They may speak behind your back and portray you as "angry", "crazy" or "untrustworthy" in hopes that no one will believe you when you speak up. Many abusers will say "no one will love you like I do", "you have nowhere to go" or "no one will believe you" explicitly to discourage you from breaking the isolation that silences you. They may also simply prevent you from spending time with your friends and family or anyone who may have the potential to defend or support you.

The reality, however, is that you are not alone and many might understand your circumstances and support you. One in three women around the world has faced violence. Chances are that one of those women is your friend, your neighbor, or even your sister and mother. If you are facing violence or abuse, it is incredibly important to prevent being isolated. Make sure you have one or two friends or family members you can trust and share your situation with. This is good for your mental health and for

reassuring yourself that you are not going crazy and it is also essential if you ever think your life is in danger.

Abusers are rarely always abusive. Even the most violent abusers go through phases in which they may act “like a normal person”. During these periods, they may treat you with kindness and empathy, but over time these periods of peace often get shorter and less frequent. It is important for you to speak with someone throughout these phases because often when we are facing violence ourselves, it is hard for us to see patterns. We want to keep hoping and believing that this time it is different and this time the abuser is permanently changed. It is important to have friends and support systems that will be able to see that trend and help us recognize it when we can't.

The reason we don't recognize these trends or even abuse itself sometimes is that abusive men are master manipulators. One of the many survivors we spoke with said that although her partner was emotionally, sexually and physically abusive, every time she tried to leave, he would threaten to commit suicide. One time he picked up a knife and started cutting himself to stop her from leaving the house. He argued that he wouldn't and couldn't live without her and promised to change his behavior, but within weeks the abuse would return and sometimes it would be even more intense. Eventually she left him and returned to her father's house. The abuser hasn't committed suicide. The threat of suicide was a tactic he used to keep his wife under emotional distress and prevent her from seeking freedom. Some abusers might make you feel like you are “worthless,” “stupid”, “weak” and “dependent” on them so that you feel emotional barriers if you try to leave. They might also tell you that the treatment you're receiving is normal or go through “nice phases” to make you forget about the abuse you were facing, but all these tactics are intended to prevent you from trusting your own instincts and standing up for yourself.

Our communal image of an abusive man is not realistic. We often imagine illiterate men with long beards who are angry and violent because the food has gone wrong. In conversations about violence, men who abuse are portrayed as always angry and uncontrollable, but abusive men can be completely pleasant and even loving at times. Abusive men don't have a certain look or demeanor. They can seem completely “normal” and come from any social or economic group and have any level of education. Abusive men use their social status and demeanor as a means to isolate the person they are abusing and increase their own credibility. This makes having a support system even more important.

Make sure you have at least one person you can call on if you are afraid for your life. Your support system can be colleagues, friends, classmates, family members, mental health specialists such as therapists, or people who work in the field of gender-based violence. They can provide you with emotional support and lend a helping hand if you are financially dependent on your abuser.

If you are in immediate physical danger, create a plan for safely leaving the situation. Every year thousands of women around the world are killed by men they know. A 2014 report by UN Women showed that 55 percent of women victims of homicide are killed by an intimate partner or family member. In contrast, a family member or partner killed less than eight percent of murdered men. If you have any reason to believe your life is in danger, make plans to leave. Your life is more valuable than your reputation, your property, or anything else keeping you in an abusive situation. By the same token, if you don't feel that your life is in danger, but you want to live without violence, you have the right to do so. Here are some things to consider at this stage.

- Open a secret bank account to save some money or have a secret spot to hide some money.
- Have an escape bag ready and hidden somewhere. Your bag should include your *tazkera* (national ID card), a copy of your husband's *tazkera*, and copies of your passports, educational documents, *nekah khat*, bank card (if you have one), phone numbers and addresses of people you trust, some money you can use for taxi or any other emergency need, and a change of clothes for you and your children (if you have any and you are taking them with you).
- Plan different escape routes. Don't take the route that your abuser would suspect you are taking.
- Try not to leave when your abuser is watching you. It is always safer to leave when the abuser is not looking or out of the house.
- If possible, make sure you have reliable transportation to a safe place. This could be your parent's house, a friend's house, or a women's shelter.
- Inform a few people you trust that you plan to leave. Make sure they are trustworthy and they won't share this with the abuser as violence is often the most lethal when the abuser fears you may leave.
- If you go to a police station, be aware that "running away from home" is no longer considered a crime in Afghanistan. Try not to go there alone and make it clear that you know your rights. Demand to be connected to a shelter or a women's rights organization if you don't have a safe place to go to.
- Learn about your rights. In Afghanistan, most forms of violence against women is illegal. You can get legal advice and guidance if you visit the local women's affairs office or a women's rights organization. Throughout that process make sure you are in charge and aware of your options. Don't allow *anyone* to coerce or pressure you into returning to your abuser. No one knows your situation like you do.

If you are facing violence from your husband and want to leave you have options. If you are conflicted about separation, that feeling is completely normal. Leaving a marriage is a tough decision that no one else can make for you and it is made even more difficult by laws and societal norms in our country. However, divorced and separated women deserve the same dignity and rights as other women. They are no less than anyone else and they are entitled to the same human rights.

Leaving your marriage is not selfish. If you decide to leave many may tell you that you are being selfish and not prioritizing your family or your children over your own happiness. They might urge you to “just tolerate the violence” and “it will get better over time”. They might tell you that the violence you are facing is normal and everyone faces it so you should just make do. None of this is true. **You have one life and you have a right to make this life yours.** You have the right to prioritize your happiness and success. Taking care of yourself is not selfish. It is a basic human need. It makes it easier for you to serve the world and be a better person. In order to be a good mother, friend, or sister, you need to first take care of yourself. If you are broken, you can’t heal and help anyone else.

On the other hand, if you are not ready to separate from your abusive husband, that is also your decision. While your friends and family can provide you with support, they don’t know your life as well as you do. You and you alone should make this decision.

It is not your fault that “the family is broken”. Our society blames divorced women for breaking up families and taking a parent away from their children. Strong familial ties that are based on love and kindness can’t be broken. Many families continue to have friendly and respectful relationships with one another even after divorce. If a family seems broken because an abused wife sought divorce, that family was never whole. A family where one or more members face violence cannot be whole. If anyone, the abuser should be held responsible for breaking the family, not the survivor of violence.

Leaving an abusive marriage is not only right for you but also for your children. Research shows that girls who grow up around abuse come to think of it as the norm and boys who grow up with their male role model, often their father, being abusive to their mothers, are more likely to become abusers themselves. In addition, a violent husband will also be an abusive father. Would a husband who beats his wife, respect his daughter’s rights? Are there any guarantees that he will not sell his daughter off in marriage? To end the cycle of violence we need to teach our girls and our boys that abuse is not normal or acceptable. Children learn abuse first and foremost from their parents. Living away from an abusive household is essential for having well-adjusted, kind, and happy children.

Do not let *anyone* make you feel guilty about leaving an abusive relationship.

Learn about your rights: In Afghanistan, the divorce laws largely favor men. As you may know, a man can divorce his wife for any reason at any time, but for a woman to

seek divorce she needs her husband's agreement or to prove that she is facing physical violence, that her husband is terminally ill or not physically home for long periods of time, or that he is not paying for family costs. In addition, we know that no matter what the law says, implementation of the law when it comes to protecting women is inconsistent. Depending on where you are and who the lawyers and judges are, the law is interpreted and implemented differently.

Despite all these obstacles, the number of women seeking divorce is rising across the country and major contributors to this rise are gender-based violence and women's awareness of their rights. With more women seeking divorce, eventually divorce will be less stigmatized which can in turn lead to more progressive legislature and more protections for women.

For the time being, here are some tips to assist you in legally leaving your abusive husband, if and when you are ready:

- Before seeking divorce, seek real legal help. What we offer here is a series of general tips. They may not apply to your circumstance. You can acquire legal help by visiting your local women's council, the women's affairs office at your area, or a women's rights organization.
- To legally seek divorce, you need to have a *tazkera*. Make sure you have the original and several copies stored in different locations around the house.
- If possible, using family pressure, convince your husband to seek the divorce. The process is shorter and you will not have to provide any proof of the violence you are facing, especially since providing proof for emotional or sexualized violence can be nearly impossible in Afghanistan.
- Document the abuse you are facing. Write it in letters to people you trust. Take images of the bruises and impact of the physical abuse you've faced on your body. If you can record the sound of violent incident that can also be helpful.
- In many instances, the law requires five human witnesses to testify that you've faced violence. Find these witnesses among your friends and extended family members and ensure that they are committed to speak up for you. The court can reject witnesses from the nuclear family.
- Because of the stigma attached to divorce, many couples don't seek divorce and simply get separated. This may be an option for you, but using family pressure and witnesses, make sure your abusive husband commits to leaving you alone.

Many women don't seek divorce because of Afghanistan's custody laws. According to our country's Civil Law, after the age of seven for boys and nine for girls, custody belongs to the father. Second in line is the grandfather. In fact, the way the law is practiced, male cousins and uncles sometimes receive the right to custody before mothers do. Many abusive men use this law to control women and force them to stay in abusive marriages even if they don't want to have custody over the children themselves.

Some tips for women seeking divorce and custody:

- The court requires fathers to pay alimony for each child while they are under your custody, until the age of seven for boys and nine for girls. Alimony includes costs of food, clothes, and medical expenses, and you have the right to sue your ex-husband if he refuses to provide it.
- If a divorced mother decides to get married with another person at any time before her children reach the legal ages, she automatically loses custody over them. The ex-husband, however, can get married.
- Some husbands will allow you to get custody over your children if you forgo of your *mahr*. This is difficult decision, especially if you don't have an income, but you can discuss it with a lawyer if you think it is a good idea for you.
- Because many women have tried leaving the country with their children, the court can prevent your children from traveling with you.
- Your ex-husband may use custody laws to pressure you further or "punish" you for leaving him. One of the ways he may do this is to get you to provide proof, a guarantee letter from a business owner, that you won't leave the country with the children. This letter of proof is not required by law. You can remind your lawyer of this and insist on the right to custody until the children are of age.
- Many survivors of violence have said that often their ex-husbands do not want to have the responsibility to care for their children, but will use the custody battle and process to pressure, stigmatize, and inflict further verbal and emotional abuse onto the mother. Try to figure out if your ex-husband wants the children or is using them as power to leverage over you. This may impact how you go about asking for custody.

Rebuilding your life after facing abuse can be overwhelming and difficult, but if you have freed yourself from violence, you're done with the hardest part and now, there is nothing you can't do.

Congratulate yourself. You've left an abusive, dangerous, and harmful situation. That is an extraordinary accomplishment especially in our conservative society where survivors, not their abusers, are blamed and marginalized. You've decided that your life has worth and value and you have the right to live free of violence and abuse and be fulfilled and reach your highest potential. We agree with you. You are worthy and we are glad you are taking care of yourself. In freeing yourself, you've also carved a path for survivors who come after you so that they are more courageous and more confident in seeking freedom. Thank you for doing that.

Freeing yourself from violence and rebuilding is easier said than done. No one knows this better than you, but here are some tips as you move forward.

Find a means to **provide for yourself**. A large number of women stay or return to abusive relationships because of lack of financial self-sufficiency. While right after leaving an abusive home, you can live in a shelter, or friend or family member's house, this is not a long-term solution. Often, abusers will try to destroy your self-esteem by saying you won't survive by yourself and you don't have any skills or any worth. This is not true. If you have survived life so far, you have real skills. Find a piece of paper and list the skills you have and the jobs you can apply for using those skills. If you are a good caretaker, see if your neighbors need a nanny. If you are a doctor, search for jobs in the local clinic. If you can sew, start making clothes for people you know in exchange for some money.

Save. It is incredibly important that you begin saving as soon as you have an income. You don't have to save a lot, but you do have to save consistently. Put away 5-10 Afghanis per week. Before you know it, you will have enough to visit a doctor or pay for an emergency cost. If your income is through a small business, like selling eggs or sewing, you can use your savings strategically to improve or expand your business.

In addition to rebuilding your life financially, you need to invest in your mental health. Nearly every abuser who uses physical or sexualized violence is also an emotional abuser. It is important for you to heal from the emotional wounds as well as the physical ones.

Surround yourself with as much positive social support as you can find. Make friends who lift you up and give you confidence and hope. It can be hard to make friends after facing abuse. The abuser might have destroyed your friendships and isolated you. In addition, you may not be able to trust anyone after facing abuse. It is important however that you take ownership of your life. Don't allow abuse to follow you and shape you as you rebuild a new life. It is understandable to be more careful with friendships, but you can't let fear control your life. You are way more than the abuse you have faced and you have a lot more ahead of you.

Find an exercise routine you enjoy. Research shows that regular exercise decreases depression and anxiety. If you have a hard time exercising by yourself, find a group of friends. You can simply run around the yard or do stretches every morning for 10-20 minutes. A small routine can also add normalcy to your life.

Plan your future. Write down your goals and dreams. Focusing on the future can make it easier for you to focus on your goals. Keep a journal where you celebrate your accomplishments. Did you get your license? Did you find a job? Did you make a new friend? Did you learn a new skill? Did you have a good day where you felt happy and fulfilled? Did you sleep well after months of nightmares and trauma? Write down what makes you happy and celebrate every step you take towards an abuse-free life.

Remember that you are worthy and you have the right to live a life free of violence. What you faced was not your fault. **You have the ability to rebuild your life. And most importantly, you are not alone. Hundreds of thousands of women across the globe are standing with you as you seek freedom.**