



« If you feel pain, you are alive.
If you feel the pain of others,
you are human. »

12 ARTICLES THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE!

Introduction

1 – Introduction

These articles address the many forms of sexual abuse and sexual violence. Their purpose is to help readers better understand these issues, respond wisely, and find the support needed to overcome the lasting effects of abuse. They also encourage survivors to break the silence and speak about what they have experienced.

If you have questions, would like personal advice, or wish to organize a conference—either online (Zoom) or in person—please feel free to contact me.

You can also download my book **Children and Teens in Danger** free of charge from my website.

Another helpful resource is my video **Explaining Sexual Violence to Children**.

Sincerely,

Jean-Louis Lafont

Every human life is of immeasurable value. Yet countless people endure violence while their dignity—and often the law itself—is ignored. The family, which should be a place of safety and protection, is too often the setting for severe abuse, including psychological harassment, physical violence, verbal abuse, incest, and domestic violence. These forms of abuse are not confined to the home; they also occur in schools, workplaces, sports organizations, and many other environments. No community is immune.

Carrying a painful secret is an overwhelming burden. It damages self-esteem, physical and emotional health, relationships, and often limits a person's ability to succeed in school or at work. For survivors, speaking about what happened is extraordinarily difficult. We must create environments where prevention, compassion, and solidarity make it possible for victims to speak freely. Silence prolongs the wounds; speaking out begins the process of healing.

2 – The Voiceless

Victims of sexual abuse are often much closer than we realize. They may be our neighbors, coworkers, friends, classmates, or even members of our own family. We greet them, talk with them, and work alongside them—yet remain completely unaware of the suffering they carry. Perhaps you yourself have experienced this kind of abuse.

The media still give far too little attention to these realities. Stories about abused infants, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and other forms of abuse rarely receive sustained coverage. As a society, we are often reluctant to face truths that are deeply disturbing.

When sexual abuse is discussed—especially incest—the media often prefer to use the word *pedophilia* rather than *incest*. Pedophilia suggests an offender outside the family, avoiding the painful reality that abuse frequently occurs within the home. Incest shatters our idealized image of the family as a safe haven.

Many people picture a stranger offering candy to a child, forcing the child into a car, and committing a violent assault. While such crimes do occur, they are relatively rare. Far more common is the fact that approximately **80% of sexual offenses against minors are committed within the family itself**. The wolf is not trying to get into the sheepfold—it already lives there. Too often, the family becomes the very place where violence occurs.

The overwhelming majority of perpetrators are men (about **95%**) who were expected to protect children. They are usually known to their victims and are often members of the family. Children are the primary victims of sexual violence, with girls affected more frequently than boys. Other vulnerable people—including individuals with disabilities and those experiencing homelessness—are also at heightened risk.

According to **UN Women**, approximately one in three women worldwide has experienced violence, and in some countries the figure approaches seven out of ten. Certain forms of abuse remain especially difficult to disclose. Marital sexual violence, for example, is among those that women find hardest to talk about.

In France, a woman is killed by her husband, partner, or former partner approximately every two and a half days. The greatest danger often comes after separation. Some women are sexually assaulted years after leaving an abusive relationship, in acts of revenge. The consequences can include

unwanted pregnancies, abortions, chronic fear, depression, and suicidal thoughts.

Organizations such as the **National Federation for Women's Solidarity (FNSF)** help women prepare to leave abusive relationships and find confidential shelters where they can rebuild their lives in safety.

For some women, deeply held religious beliefs about marriage and family make pursuing legal action especially difficult. Feelings of shame are compounded by fear of being judged or rejected by their faith community, leaving them uncertain about where to turn.

Others live under such strict control that they are virtually imprisoned by their partners. They cannot leave the house alone or make phone calls freely. Foreign women without legal immigration status may fear that reporting abuse could lead to deportation if their situation is exposed.

Both adult and child victims often say the same thing:

"I was told not to tell anyone."

For the victim, speaking out means taking enormous risks—for themselves, for their family, and sometimes for everyone around them. The dilemma is heartbreaking. To speak may divide the family; to remain silent is equally unbearable. Reporting abuse can also lead to criminal prosecution, with serious legal consequences for those responsible.

So the question remains:

For victims, speaking out is essential—but whom can they trust? How can they overcome the fear of telling their story?

3 – Secrets and Silence: Major Sources of Lasting Trauma

A few examples

Psychological pressure and fear

When abusers exert psychological pressure—often reinforced by threats or fear of violence—victims may eventually submit. Being unable to resist can leave them with an overwhelming sense of guilt that is often as destructive as the abuse itself. Silence and fear leave deep emotional and psychological scars.

The belief that a victim somehow “went along with it” or was “complicit” is simply false.

Threats, blackmail, and misplaced loyalty

Many victims remain silent because they are intimidated by threats, manipulation, blackmail, or pressure to protect the abuser.

In France, many survivors do not come forward until years—or even decades—later. This delay is not a matter of choice; it is usually the result of coercive control and circumstances that make disclosure extremely difficult. Some victims do not even realize immediately that what happened to them was a crime.

Nothing weighs more heavily than a painful secret.

When words fail, the body speaks

When a person cannot express trauma with words, the body often speaks instead. It is impossible **not** to communicate.

Among adolescents, unresolved trauma may appear through high-risk behaviors, self-harm, running away from home, early alcohol abuse, drug addiction, eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, and many other destructive coping mechanisms.

Sexual abuse traps victims in shame, fear, and diminished self-worth. As adults, they may become especially vulnerable to further victimization, struggle with feelings of rejection and abandonment, experience chronic sleep disorders, perform poorly in school, or fail to reach their educational potential.

Confusion and abandonment

Children who are sexually abused often grow up profoundly confused. They lose trust—not only in their parents, but in adults and society as a whole.

They may watch a father repeatedly violate the law within the home while life continues as though nothing has happened. A mother may choose to protect her marriage instead of protecting her child.

The result is often a deep sense of betrayal and the loss of any secure point of reference.

Sexual difficulties

Some young children who have been sexually abused develop a distorted understanding of sexuality. This may be expressed through voyeurism, exhibitionism, attempts to abuse younger children, or other inappropriate sexual behaviors.

In some cases, these behaviors can escalate to inserting objects into intimate body areas or engaging in compulsive masturbation.

Survivors involved in prostitution

Many women—and men—in prostitution report a history of childhood sexual abuse, often within an incestuous family environment.

Painful beliefs about relationships

Victims often grow up carrying deeply rooted beliefs such as:

- People who are supposed to love me cannot be trusted.
- Any kindness will eventually come with sexual demands.
- I have no control over my own body.
- Other people's needs always matter more than mine.

Lifelong consequences

Childhood abuse has consequences that often last a lifetime. It significantly increases the risk of depression, teenage pregnancy, poverty, and prostitution.

What a child suffers frequently becomes the starting point for future violence—either because the person becomes vulnerable to further abuse or, in some cases, because the cycle of violence is repeated.

This list is far from exhaustive.

Dr. Murielle Salmona's perspective

Dr. Murielle Salmona writes:

“Experiencing these crimes during childhood is the leading cause of premature death, suicide, addictive behaviors, severe poverty, social exclusion, and numerous physical illnesses. Ninety-seven percent of rape victims suffer consequences for their mental health, and forty-three percent experience lasting effects on their physical health.”

Children who witness violence are victims too

Children who witness domestic violence are themselves victims. Merely witnessing repeated abuse can leave lasting psychological trauma.

The rise in domestic homicides also affects children. Many lose their mothers; some lose their own lives in the violence.

Every child—and every adult—who appears to be suffering deserves to be asked a simple but courageous question:

“Have you ever been a victim of—or a witness to—sexual abuse?”

Ask the question.

Children rarely volunteer this information on their own.

4 – Listening and Painful Secrets

Every family—whether wealthy or poor, famous or unknown—may hide painful secrets. These may involve political scandals, hidden children, abortions, addiction treatment, concealed sexual orientation, time spent in prison, or childhood abuse, including sexual assault.

Some wounds are not caused by actions but by words. Humiliating remarks spoken during childhood can leave scars that last for decades.

Physical abuse and neglect

Abuse can take many tangible forms: beatings, torture, burns, and other acts of physical violence. Children often invent explanations for their injuries—claiming they fell or were hurt while playing with other children. In some cases, parents also neglect basic needs by withholding food or medical care.

Coercive control and the loss of freedom

Abuse is not always physical. Some victims live under coercive control that strips away their freedom. An abusive spouse may prevent the other person from voting, practicing their faith, earning an income, or making independent decisions.

Many women are effectively imprisoned in their own homes. They cannot leave without permission or even make a phone call freely.

Sexual and psychological harassment in the workplace

Sexual and psychological harassment can include sexist jokes, degrading comments, intrusive touching, unwanted physical contact, and explicit sexual propositions.

These are only some examples.

Breaking the silence is the first step toward healing

Confiding in a trustworthy person is often the beginning of recovery.

For many survivors, disclosing abuse requires extraordinary courage. Speaking out may bring fears for their own safety, concern for their family, or anxiety about the consequences for others.

When someone finally finds the courage to tell their story, they need to hear clearly:

“I will stand with you.”

“I will help you.”

Those words begin to break the isolation that abuse creates.

What to say when someone confides in you

One of the most healing experiences for a survivor is simply to be believed.

The first responses should be simple, sincere, and unmistakable:

“I believe you.”

“This was not your fault.”

“You are not responsible.”

Avoid preconceived ideas. Resist the temptation to explain, minimize, or interpret what happened before fully listening.

Being believed is often the first step toward healing.

5 – From Compassion to Action

“As a pastor, a young woman once confided in me that she had been the victim of incest for several years. One question overwhelmed me: what was the right thing to do? After much hesitation, I realized that reporting the abuse to the public prosecutor was the only responsible course of action. In the end, my decision was guided by the need to protect the victim, safeguard her younger siblings, serve the best interests of the family, and uphold the law.

I will not pretend it was easy. The experience left me deeply shaken. But my priority was to seek the genuine good of everyone involved. In a tragedy like this, emotions alone cannot guide our decisions. The path toward healing required not only restoration, but also the intervention of justice.”

A painful secret entrusted to you can become a heavy burden. It affects your thoughts, your conscience, and sometimes every aspect of daily life.

When what you learn reveals that someone is in danger, silence is not an option. Compassion must lead to action.

That may simply mean staying in regular contact with the victim, listening, encouraging, and walking alongside them.

In emergencies—such as situations involving domestic violence—it may also mean offering temporary shelter, either in your own home or through trusted friends, while longer-term solutions are arranged.

True solidarity often requires us to step outside our comfort zone.

Should every secret be kept?

No.

It is possible to love someone while refusing to excuse criminal behavior.

Protecting the victim and acknowledging the reality of their suffering is itself an act of love.

Whenever a crime has been committed, it must be reported to the proper authorities.

The law applies to everyone.

Never participate in private arrangements intended to “settle the matter” outside the justice system. Such agreements rarely solve anything and almost always come at the expense of the victim.

Only the courts have the authority to judge criminal offenses. No priest, pastor, parent, friend, or other adult can take the place of the justice system.

What if the offender asks for forgiveness?

Forgiveness must never be confused with exemption from justice.

Even when an offender sincerely repents, they remain accountable to society for crimes that the law recognizes as criminal offenses.

Fear of conflict often keeps us from acting.

Yet justice requires courage.

Why report the abuse?

Not every situation can be resolved through education, counseling, or mediation. Sometimes legal intervention is essential.

When abuse is ongoing, reporting it can stop further harm—not only to the current victim but also to other members of the family who may be at risk.

Failing to act reinforces the offender’s sense of impunity while deepening the victim’s feeling of abandonment and vulnerability. It also encourages indifference among those who know what is happening.

Who should act?

The victim should normally be the one to file a criminal complaint. When the victim is a minor, they should be supported throughout the process. No one should pressure them into filing a report—or discourage them from doing so.

However, whenever you believe that someone is in danger, you have a responsibility to notify law enforcement or the appropriate judicial authorities.

Your report could save a life.

In France, anonymous reports can also be made in certain circumstances.

French law distinguishes between different legal procedures for reporting offenses. A formal criminal complaint initiates legal proceedings that may lead to prosecution and compensation for the victim. Such complaints may be filed with the police, the gendarmerie, or directly with the public prosecutor.

Filing a complaint does not automatically guarantee a conviction. Cases may be dismissed or closed without prosecution, and this can be painful for victims.

Even so, one truth remains:

Silence is worse than anything else.

It protects only the offender.

Speaking out is the beginning of change. It restores dignity and self-worth. Family members and friends also have a crucial role to play by standing beside victims and helping them through this difficult journey.

6 – Several Factors That Promote Healing

Healing is a journey rather than a single event. While every survivor's path is unique, certain elements consistently contribute to recovery.

Breaking the silence

For survivors, one of the most healing steps is to break the silence, express their suffering, and be believed by the person who listens.

Speaking openly—and being genuinely heard—helps break through confusion and the profound sense of abandonment that abuse so often creates.

The healing power of compassionate listening

To be truly listened to is to experience another person's compassion.

Compassion fosters trust and encourages survivors to continue speaking.

I cannot overstate how deeply healing it is to listen attentively to someone who shares such painful experiences. Listening is not merely the introduction to a conversation before moving on to solutions.

Real listening is, in itself, the beginning of healing.

Writing one's story

For many survivors, writing the story of their life is also profoundly restorative.

Putting painful experiences into words can help bring order to chaos and become an important part of the healing process.

Healing through relationships

Sexual abuse often drives victims into isolation.

Many withdraw emotionally, avoid relationships, and struggle to trust new people.

One essential goal is therefore to help survivors reconnect with others, rebuild healthy relationships, and overcome isolation.

Becoming part of a community again

Encouraging survivors to join a local support group, community organization, or volunteer association can be an important step toward recovery.

Participating in meaningful activities with others helps restore a sense of belonging and purpose.

Providing practical help

Helping someone also means offering practical resources.

Providing reliable contact information, support organizations, helplines, and professional services can make an enormous difference.

Sometimes the most helpful gift is simply knowing where to turn next.

The role of justice in healing

Legal action also has an important place in the healing process.

Many survivors experience not only the original abuse but also a second wound: denial by members of their own family.

When a court holds the offender accountable, it can finally put an end to years of denial, disbelief, and deception. It publicly acknowledges that the abuse truly occurred and recognizes the suffering the survivor has endured.

Healing can often be measured by the survivor's growing ability to separate their identity from the trauma they endured and by their increasing capacity to invest emotionally in healthy new relationships.

Recovery is a long journey.

No one heals alone.

Healing involves the whole person—the mind, the emotions, the body, one's relationship with oneself, and one's relationships with others.

7 – Key Definitions

In France, sexual offenses fall into three main legal categories:

- Rape
- Sexual assault
- Sexual abuse of a minor (sexual acts with a minor that do not necessarily involve violence, threats, or coercion but are nevertheless prohibited by law)

Rape

Under French law,

“Any act of sexual penetration, of whatever nature, committed against another person through violence, coercion, threats, or surprise constitutes rape.”

Rape is classified as a **crime**.

In practical terms, any act of sexual penetration without the victim’s consent is legally considered rape.

In France, approximately one out of every two serious sexual crimes involves rape, and most victims are minors.

About **75%** of rapes are committed by someone the victim knows and trusts—a father, brother, husband, boyfriend, coworker, or another trusted individual.

Penetration may be vaginal, anal, or oral and may involve the penis, a finger, or an object.

Many survivors believe they experienced “sexual assault” when, legally, what occurred was rape—for example, when penetration involved a finger.

French law allows survivors of child rape to report the crime for many years after reaching adulthood, recognizing that traumatic amnesia and psychological control often delay disclosure.

Sexual assault

French law defines sexual assault as:

“Any sexual act committed through violence, coercion, threats, or surprise.”

This category includes unwanted sexual touching without penetration.

Examples include unwanted touching of intimate body parts, forced kissing, compelled exposure to pornography, or being photographed in sexual contexts against one's will.

Such acts are increasingly normalized in society, but they remain serious violations of personal dignity and bodily autonomy.

Sexual abuse of a minor

French law also prohibits adults from engaging in sexual acts with minors, even in situations where violence, threats, or coercion are absent.

Since legislation adopted in **April 2021**, any sexual relationship between an adult and a child under the age of **15** is prohibited, regardless of purported consent.

The law recognizes that children cannot legally consent to such relationships.

Consent requires genuine freedom

Valid consent requires that a person:

- has the mental capacity to understand what they are agreeing to;
- is not impaired by alcohol or drugs;
- is free from coercion or manipulation;
- is not under the authority of the other person (such as a teacher, coach, employer, or other figure of authority).

Sexual relations—including within marriage—must always be based on genuine consent.

Giving in is not the same as giving consent.

Incest

Incest is a form of sexual abuse.

It involves forcing a child into sexual contact by using the adult's own body.

The child may be compelled to touch or masturbate the offender, kiss them, or perform other sexual acts.

Incest also includes exposing children to sexual activity, appearing naked before them, showing them pornography, or photographing them in sexually explicit situations.

In most cases, incest is not an isolated event.

Approximately **80%** of cases continue over a period of years.

Incest may involve penetration—or it may not. Either way, it remains sexual abuse.

It is also important to recognize that women can commit incest or participate in it. The widespread assumption that mothers are always protective can make female perpetrators especially difficult to identify.

Frequently asked questions

Was it rape?

Can someone force me to perform a sexual act?

Can someone pressure me into sexual activity simply because we are married or in a relationship?

Legally, rape involves sexual penetration without consent.

Many rapes occur without obvious physical violence because victims are unable to resist due to manipulation, fear, intimidation, or psychological control.

In France, only a portion of rapes involve visible physical violence beyond the assault itself.

When consent is impossible

Consent cannot exist when a person:

- is under the influence of alcohol or drugs;
- has a disability that prevents informed consent;
- is unconscious.

Consent is also invalid when the offender abuses a position of trust or authority—such as a teacher, coach, employer, or caregiver—or uses threats, blackmail, or coercion to obtain sexual acts.

The same applies when emotional manipulation or economic dependence (housing, employment, financial support, protection, etc.) leaves a person unable to refuse freely.

A person may comply without ever truly consenting.

The essential question is therefore:

Have I been raped—or have I raped someone?

8 – Consent

Consent means freely giving your agreement.

In the context of sexuality, it means willingly and freely agreeing to engage in a sexual relationship.

Yet even between adults, consent is not always genuine. A person may initially refuse but eventually give in because of persistent pressure, fear, intimidation, manipulation, or emotional coercion.

Giving in is not the same as consenting.

No one has the right to impose sexual activity on another person against their will.

Intimate relationships are only legitimate when consent is clear, free, and voluntary.

If the answer is “No,” everything must stop.

The special case of children

Children do not possess the same ability as adults to refuse unwanted sexual advances.

Fear, emotional dependence, immaturity, or the unequal balance of power may prevent them from resisting or speaking out.

As a result, an adult may wrongly interpret a child’s silence or lack of resistance as consent.

It is not.

The absence of resistance never means consent.

French law

Since legislation adopted in April 2021, an adult may not claim that a child under the age of **15** consented to sexual activity.

In cases of incest, the age threshold extends to **18 years**.

Any sexual relationship between an adult and a child under these legal ages is prohibited and subject to criminal penalties.

Penalties are even more severe when the offender is a parent or another person exercising legal or practical authority over the child, such as a teacher or youth leader.

What we must remember

In many cases, offenders do not rely primarily on physical violence.

Instead, they exploit authority, persuasion, emotional manipulation, seduction, or blackmail.

Children rarely refuse adults who hold positions of authority.

Even when they have been taught to beware of strangers, they naturally trust parents, teachers, coaches, relatives, and other adults responsible for their care.

Many people imagine that sexual abuse happens mainly in public places.

In reality, it most often occurs within the family, and the perpetrators are frequently relatives or trusted adults.

We also tend to imagine abuse as something sudden, brutal, and unmistakable.

Yet it often develops gradually through manipulation, grooming, threats, deception, or corruption.

In many cases, the abuse is repeated over months or years while victims remain trapped in silence.

Conclusion

When a child speaks about abuse, every adult has a responsibility to listen carefully, believe what the child is saying, and take appropriate action.

Failing to believe a child—or minimizing what has been disclosed—allows the abuse to continue.

Listening, believing, and acting are the first steps toward protection and justice.

9 – Prevention: Practical Examples (Part One)

Protecting and raising children requires time, attention, and commitment.

When parents are unable to fulfill this role consistently, risks increase—both outside and inside the home. As parental supervision decreases, teenagers gain greater freedom in choosing their friends, activities, and social circles. Without guidance, they become more vulnerable to manipulation, grooming, and exploitation.

Parents should remember that adolescents will naturally seek out a group to belong to. This is a normal part of growing up. Whether that group consists of athletes, troubled peers, or delinquent youth will have a profound influence on the young person's development.

For that reason, parents should help guide their teenagers toward communities where they can grow, mature, and flourish.

Fathers who lead their families with love

What kind of father are we?

A father's love and blessing give children strength, identity, and a sense of worth.

Before his death in 1996, the rapper **Tupac Shakur**, despite being known for harsh lyrics, said that he had never known a true father. He believed his life would have been far more disciplined had he enjoyed that kind of guidance.

Whether or not one agrees with all of his conclusions, his observation highlights an important truth:

A father plays a vital role in helping a child grow into emotional and moral maturity.

Parental authority matters

As children become teenagers, the parent-child relationship can gradually drift toward an unhealthy sense of equality.

Parents must still be willing to say “No.”

Healthy boundaries protect children from believing they are entitled to everything they want.

Of course, boundaries often produce conflict. Learning to cope with frustration is part of becoming emotionally mature.

Without limits, children may grow into adults who expect the world to revolve around them.

Contrary to popular belief, wise discipline does not suppress creativity or personal growth. It provides the structure that makes genuine maturity possible.

Teaching respect for boundaries

Children should learn obedience and respect for boundaries as early as possible.

Every healthy relationship depends upon recognizing limits.

When someone says “No,” we step back.

When a door is closed, we do not force it open.

Life is governed by boundaries, and refusing to respect them inevitably has consequences.

Learning respect within the family prepares children to respect others throughout life.

Stay watchful

Parents should remain attentive to every environment in which their children spend time—sports clubs, camps, youth groups, school activities, and similar settings.

Activities should be appropriately supervised, ideally by more than one adult.

Parents should also ensure that adults are never alone with children in sensitive places such as locker rooms or showers.

Trust should never eliminate accountability.

Occasionally visiting unexpectedly is one practical way to remain informed about the environment in which children are being cared for.

Parents should also ask their children regularly whether they have been victims—or witnesses—of bullying, abuse, or any other inappropriate behavior.

The most effective form of prevention

Nothing is more effective than a strong relationship between parents and children.

Spend time together.

Do not leave children to grow up alone in front of screens.

Make yourself emotionally available.

When children know they can speak freely without fear, they usually will.

Take walks together.

Play games.

Attend their sporting events and school performances.

Listen carefully.

Seek to understand them.

Build a relationship strong enough that they know they are never alone.

Admit your mistakes—and encourage them

Parents should not hesitate to acknowledge their own mistakes.

Children also need frequent encouragement.

Tell them:

“I’m proud of you.”

“I believe in you.”

“You’ll find a solution.”

“You can do this.”

Words of encouragement are remarkably powerful.

The stronger the bond between parents and children, the more likely children will return to their parents when they need help, speak openly about their struggles, and seek guidance before problems become crises.

The quality of the relationship changes everything.

Teaching the difference between flirting, seduction, and harassment

An important part of prevention is helping children understand the difference between healthy attraction, mutual courtship, and harassment.

Parents and teachers cannot teach these distinctions unless they first understand them clearly themselves.

During my conferences on sexual relationships, I often point out something very simple:

The word **relationship** comes before **sexual**.

That order matters.

Healthy sexuality does not create a healthy relationship.

A healthy relationship—built on mutual respect, trust, and commitment—is what gives sexuality its proper place.

It is the quality of the relationship, not sexuality itself, that makes lasting love possible.

A question for parents

Do you know what your children have experienced—or witnessed?

Do you know what they are watching on their own phones, or on the phones of their friends?

10 – Prevention: Practical Examples (Part Two)

Schools

In many schools, sex education is limited to topics such as anatomy, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy prevention.

While these subjects are important, they are not enough.

Given the reality of violence that can also occur in schools, young people need to be taught what healthy relationships look like—relationships built on mutual respect, equality, and personal dignity.

Students should learn to distinguish clearly between **flirting, courtship, and harassment**.

They should also be encouraged to take time to build relationships instead of rushing into sexual intimacy.

Learning to control one's words, attitudes, and physical behavior is an essential part of genuine respect for others.

Challenging the influence of pornography

Pornography presents a false and destructive model of sexuality.

Healthy sexuality should be understood as the natural expression of a relationship in which two people have taken time to know one another, appreciate one another, and freely commit themselves to each other.

Pornography teaches the opposite.

It separates sexuality from love, respect, commitment, and genuine human dignity.

The medical community

Physicians and other healthcare professionals are often among the first people to whom survivors disclose abuse outside their immediate family.

Approximately one-quarter of victims first speak to a healthcare professional.

Yet only a small percentage of abuse reports originate from physicians.

Medical professionals therefore need better training—not only to recognize the physical and psychological consequences of abuse, but also to ask the right questions.

Patients rarely volunteer this information spontaneously.

Doctors should learn to ask gentle, open-ended questions that make it easier for survivors to disclose past experiences of incest or sexual abuse.

Pornography and public policy

Why not launch national awareness campaigns similar to those used against drunk driving?

Such campaigns could encourage victims to break their silence while helping parents learn how to discuss sexuality and abuse with their children.

Because pornography is free and available within seconds, public authorities should consider stronger measures to restrict access and strengthen regulation.

Some have suggested making access more difficult—or even introducing paid access—as one possible way to reduce consumption.

More broadly, the fight against pornography deserves to become a national priority, supported through television, radio, newspapers, conferences, and public education campaigns, just as governments have done for tobacco and impaired driving.

Public discussions could also bring together parents, educators, healthcare professionals, and community organizations to reflect on healthy relationships between men and women, boys and girls.

Professionals—including law enforcement officers who receive complaints from victims—should receive stronger training.

When credible concerns arise, reporting obligations should be taken seriously.

Finally, legislation protecting victims of sexual violence should continue to be strengthened wherever necessary.

Conclusion

Prevention is indispensable because the human cost of sexual violence is enormous.

The consequences extend from childhood into adulthood, affecting emotional well-being, physical health, intimate relationships, education, employment, and the risk of both future victimization and, in some cases, future offending.

Investing in prevention certainly has a cost.

Yet that cost is far lower than the long-term expenses associated with medical care, policing, court proceedings, lost productivity, incarceration, and the lifelong consequences borne by survivors.

Preventing abuse is not only morally right—it is also one of society's wisest investments.

A final question

What role are you willing to play in preventing abuse?

11 – Why Victims Don’t Speak: Tonic Immobility, Dissociation, and Coercive Control

People often imagine that a victim of abuse—whether a child, a teenager, or an adult—can simply leave, end the relationship, and report the offender.

Reality is far more complex.

The tragic deaths of women—and sometimes children—during or after separation remind us that leaving an abusive relationship can be one of the most dangerous moments in a victim’s life.

Escaping abuse requires support, protection, and practical assistance.

When people hear about rape or sexual assault, they often ask:

“Why didn’t she leave?”

“I would have said no.”

“I would have screamed.”

“I would have fought back.”

In reality, trauma profoundly alters the brain’s ability to respond.

Victims frequently become completely overwhelmed, unable to move, cry out, or defend themselves.

What happens in the brain during rape?

Tonic immobility

One of the brain’s automatic survival responses is **tonic immobility**.

The victim becomes physically and psychologically paralyzed.

They cannot fight.

They cannot run away.

They cannot call for help.

This is why people sometimes wrongly assume the victim consented.

“Why didn’t she resist?”

Because, in that moment, she could not.

Many survivors later blame themselves for not fighting harder, not screaming, or not escaping.

They carry a burden of guilt that does not belong to them.

Must someone be seriously injured—or killed—before society finally believes they did not consent?

Dissociation

Under overwhelming trauma, the brain sometimes protects itself by disconnecting from the experience.

The victim remains physically present but feels detached from reality—as though watching events happen to someone else.

This state of dissociation can persist long after the assault, especially if the victim continues to live with or remain under the influence of the offender.

Emotions become numb.

Life becomes automatic.

This is one reason why victims often seem unable to leave abusive relationships.

They are living under **coercive control**.

Guilt, shame, and the fear of not being believed

Whether young or old, many victims feel ashamed.

Many blame themselves.

Many believe—and often with good reason—that no one will believe them.

In a society where rape is still minimized or questioned, survivors hear comments such as:

“Are you sure it was really rape?”

“Maybe she wanted it.”

Because of tonic immobility, dissociation, traumatic memory disturbances, and fear of disbelief, victims may remain silent for years.

Dr. Murielle Salmona’s perspective

Dr. Murielle Salmona writes:

“In a just world, women experiencing domestic violence would be immediately protected when they ask for help. Unfortunately, that is far from our reality. Death threats are still too rarely taken seriously, and effective protection is often lacking, despite legal measures that now exist.

After separation, violent partners frequently continue the abuse by using the children—through custody arrangements and visitation rights. While concern for their children may give some women the strength to leave and press charges, those same children may also become the primary reason they remain silent, fearing they could lose custody or expose them to even greater danger.”

In reality, no one escapes alone

Children.

Teenagers.

Women trapped in abusive relationships.

None of them can usually escape on their own.

Many have no financial resources.

Some have no employment.

Others have no legal immigration status.

Abusers often control every aspect of their lives.

Understanding tonic immobility, dissociation, and coercive control helps explain behaviors that otherwise seem incomprehensible to outside observers.

The same phenomenon can be observed in public places.

Victims who are assaulted on the street or on public transportation often appear frozen.

Unable even to ask for help, they depend entirely on the intervention of those around them.

Yet all too often, bystanders look away.

Each of us has the ability to act—to call the police, report the crime, or simply stand beside the victim.

Doing something is always better than doing nothing.

Martin Niemöller's warning

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Catholics, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Catholic.

Then they came for me— and there was no one left to speak for me.

Martin Niemöller (1892–1984) was a German pastor who opposed the Nazi regime. Arrested in 1937, he spent years in concentration camps before being liberated in 1945.

His words remind us that indifference always comes at a cost.

A call to action

We need stronger public commitment—not only from governments, but from ordinary citizens.

Stand beside victims.

Tell them they are not alone.

Break their isolation.

Work together to provide practical help.

Real solidarity begins when compassion becomes action.

12 – Rape Culture and Indifference

Rape culture normalizes sexual violence by shifting responsibility from the offender to the victim.

It gives rise to statements such as:

- *“She’s making it up.”*
- *“She’s exaggerating.”*
- *“She was asking for it.”*
- *“It’s her own fault.”*
- *“She should have protected herself.”*

Surveys reveal how widespread these attitudes remain:

- About **40%** of respondents believe that a woman’s “provocative” behavior in public somehow reduces the rapist’s responsibility, or that if a victim truly resisted, she could drive the attacker away.
- Around **30%** believe that revealing clothing partly excuses the rapist.
- More than **20%** think that some women actually like being forced into sexual activity or simply “don’t know what they want.”

The underlying assumption is always the same:

If she didn’t resist, she must have consented.

People sometimes say:

“She was walking alone at night. She brought it on herself. If she had been more careful, none of this would have happened.”

Although these attitudes have declined overall, they remain surprisingly common—particularly among young adults—and may be reinforced by the widespread availability of pornography.

Indifference

Not long ago, a young woman was sexually assaulted on a subway train in full view of numerous passengers.

No one intervened.

No one called the police.

According to investigators, surveillance footage showed witnesses turning away and walking off despite the victim's cries for help.

Why didn't someone call the police?

Why didn't anyone alert transit personnel?

Everyone had a phone.

Yet almost no one acted.

When just one person chooses to intervene, a powerful message is sent:

This is unacceptable.

The victim deserves protection.

The offender must be stopped.

One courageous action often inspires others to act as well.

Passive bystanders become people who are proud that they chose to help.

We should never accept a society where indifference becomes normal.

Dare to stand together

Let us become people of solidarity.

Let us encourage public awareness campaigns that teach people how to respond when they witness abuse.

Education requires repetition.

These campaigns should clearly explain:

- whom to call,
- how to protect the victim,
- how to stop the offender,
- and how to overcome indifference.

A final reflection

In the Roman world, cruelty was widely admired as a virtue of strength and power.

The Gospel answered that culture not with greater force, but with gentleness, compassion, and love.

Caring for the weak and protecting the vulnerable was—and still is—a profoundly revolutionary way of living.

Cruelty has not disappeared.

It simply takes different forms today.

But love and solidarity remain powerful answers.

My definition of healthy human relationships

“Seek the good of the other person.”

(Philippians 2:4)

Jean-Louis

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Lafont