**In our homes**

In most cultures, the notion of home is rooted in extremely profound and naturalized assumptions about its nature, and feelings about home lie deep in the human heart.

In colonizer and many other dominant cultures, there is a public/private divide, which often doesn’t work in the interests of the more vulnerable/dependant members of the human family. For those whose freedom is particularly limited by lack of (public) power, the construction of the domestic sphere as a private space sets the stage for danger, silence and shame. What plays out is a personal (secret) drama of problems that are seen as individual, not social, and (at least somewhat) the responsibility of the victim.

In cases where, rather than being a refuge in a hostile world, home itself is hostile, acknowledging its brutality brings discomfort to many. And so sometimes, despite the best intentions, people collude with an ethic of silence. To name and respond to violence in the home, we have to rattle against one of the oldest taboos in human history. Difficult to do.

But once this work starts, thorny questions arise immediately: *Am I interfering? Are they better off without my making noise that may result in the intervention of state-sanctioned institutions? Am I respecting the agency and the privacy (which is still a value despite its frequent abuse) of all the players?*

Having a strong commitment to non-violence will not make these questions easy to answer. But in all learning spaces, an unequivocal message can be constantly transmitted: Here there is no shame. It’s never your fault if someone hurt you. And it’s never okay.

Though violence in the home can and does occur against everyone, three groups in particular are most vulnerable: Children, Intimate Partners, and People in Caregiving Situations.

**Children**

Children are profoundly dependent on the others in their homes. The violence that children experience, usually at the hands of adults, painfully illustrates how children are the most powerless members of society. Children never choose to be victims of or witnesses to violence but are often are, and often survive even extreme violence with creative and brilliant strategies, and humbling resilience.

Trauma is extremely complex, both physiologically and emotionally, and its echoes long outlast childhood. Inherent in child abuse are secrecy, boundary violations and abuse of power, which can cause children to experience feelings of complicity, guilt and fear. These feelings affect their core beliefs about themselves.

Children also respond to being exposed to violence in their home, such as violence toward their mother, siblings, or pets. They may internalize the anger and violence through anxiety or depression, or externalize it by being aggressive themselves. How children are affected by witnessing abuse depends on whether they are also abused and neglected, and whether the abusers struggle with mental health and/or substance use. These forms of violence are interlocked with the larger power structures of our world—evidence of how violence works in systemic ways through individual lives.

All around the world, children are vulnerable in their homes. Child brides, as just one example, have little say in their own lives. Children with physical and intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable to their caregivers. Those with intellectual disabilities who seek to tell or show that they have experienced violence are frequently not understood or believed.

**Intimate partners**

While we are taught to be most afraid of assault by strangers, violence most frequently occurs within relationships. In intimate relationships, violence can take the form of physical, emotional, sexual and psychological abuse or economic control. Examples include physical injury and rape or threat of such acts, damage to property or pets, acts of intimidation, denial of food and money, isolation, coercion, and using children as a means of control.

The Public Health Agency of Canada defines emotional abuse as including:

* insulting or ridiculing someone or subjecting that person to other forms of verbal humiliation;
* threatening to use physical violence or murder;
* throwing, smashing, kicking or destroying the property of others;
* stalking and monitoring another's activities;
* displaying jealousy or possessiveness; and
* sexist, racist and homophobic verbal abuse  
  (Canadian Centre for Justice Studies, 2005).

This type of abuse can go on for years. Very often, children play a big part in the story. For example, a woman in an abusive situation has to weigh her need to escape against the stigma of being a single mother, fear of being perceived as an inadequate mother, and the need to retain material security for her children.

Intimate partner abuse affects marginalized, racialized and Indigenous communities disproportionately owing to the compounding nature of systemic oppressions. Not only lack of funding for advocacy and exit mechanisms, but also sexual stereotypes about lesbians, racialized women, women with disabilities, women living in poverty and Indigenous women limit access to recourse in the criminal justice system. Homo- and Transphobia in society discount many people’s relationships, obscuring the reality that power, control and abuse can exist within them, hence responses to these situations are also often inadequate.

Physical injury—up to and including murder—is not the only outcome of intimate partner abuse. This type of abuse can cause people to feel a lack of control over their lives, depression and anxiety. It can lead to substance use, problems in other relationships and suicide. It can also lead to a stronger desire for education to make employment more available or more lucrative, yet make access to education more fraught, and learning success more elusive.

**Caregiving Situations**

Caregivers of all kinds are in positions of power and responsibility. Abuse at the hands of caregivers is a profound violation of trust. The abuse of elders, by our own family members (partners, adult children) or others charged with our care (paid or volunteer) happens in every demographic of society. Older adults, and particularly older women, are vulnerable to physical, psychological, emotional and financial abuse and neglect. This may continue because the elderly are embarrassed and afraid to risk rejection by the family or community. We may not have access to assistance due to being fearful, unwilling, or unable to, leave our homes. At the same time, public and official reaction may be mediated by society’s devaluation of elderly people, leading professionals to easily believe the perpetrator’s stories that it is the elderly person who is “difficult,” who has fallen, who is muddled, and that everything is being done for “their own good.”

Caregivers may also abuse people with physical and intellectual disabilities, people with chronic or terminal illness, or those otherwise more in need of assistance, and less able to speak out about mistreatment. When our sight, hearing and/or mobility are compromised, when we have specific needs around food, medication, and personal care, our vulnerability to violence takes on several highly specific dimensions. Individuals may be sexually abused or otherwise exploited, neglected or imprisoned. There are also countless ways both privacy and dignity can be violated.