

Standing by her side

Information and assistance for supporters, friends and relatives of persons affected by sexualised violence.



bff:

Bundesverband
Frauenberatungsstellen
und Frauennotrufe

Frauen gegen Gewalt e. V.

FOR WOMEN – AGAINST VIOLENCE

*Do you know a woman who has experienced sexualised violence?
Do you want to support a friend but feel unsure about what you can actually do?*

In this brochure you will find some initial information and guidance.

Did you know ...

... that a total of 60% of all women have experienced a form of sexual harassment?

... that one in seven women experiences serious sexualised violence over her lifetime?

Sexualised violence is an act of violence. The will of another person is forced upon the woman involved using violent means. In doing so it affects her sexual self-determination, an extremely sensitive issue.

Sexualised acts of violence frequently take place where women feel most safe, namely within their families, in relationships and with friends.

Sexualised violence can affect any woman irrespective of her educational level, social status or age.

There are various manifestations of sexual violence:

- **Rape and sexual coercion;**
- **Sexual harassment in everyday life, at work or during therapy;**
- **Sexualised violence during childhood**

In case of suspected sexual violence against children, please contact a specialised centre for sexualised violence against children. Every specialised centre for abused women in your vicinity (see www.frauen-gegen-gewalt.de) can give you the address of a suitable centre.

Reactions to sexualised violence

Many social prejudices are linked to sexualised violence. As a result, women often refuse to talk about the crime, or feel afraid that nobody will believe them. They are often overwhelmed by powerful feelings of shame; they blame themselves (at least in part) for the crime, or think they should have fought back more. Given these prejudices, it is important to approach the woman concerned with an open mind, and to listen to her and believe what she says without being judgemental.

Consequences of sexualised violence for the woman concerned

An act of sexualised violence means massive infringement of privacy. It can result in completely **different kinds of behaviour** in the woman affected.



Possible indicators can be:

- › Some women talk about the crime immediately afterwards, but refuse to talk about it anymore just a short time later.
- › Others show strong emotional reactions; they are angry and volatile.
- › Others still tend to feel powerless, defenceless and anxious.
- › Some women do not talk about it for a long time, or protect themselves by denying what has happened.
- › Some women temporarily withdraw from their social environment.
- › Others are afraid of being alone or cannot tolerate certain situations in which they are alone.

The significance of the violence for the woman concerned cannot be deduced from these reactions. Some women who might at first seem very composed and emotionally stable, might have to struggle with severe implications in the long term. Likewise, women who initially display strong emotional reactions might find a more stable way of dealing with their situations a few weeks after.

It is important to know that an act of sexualised violence can have further consequences, which can make it harder for the woman concerned to come to terms with the crime and can have a huge influence on her everyday life and social relationships. These consequences can include:



- › Grief;
- › Anxiety and panic symptoms;
- › Post-traumatic stress symptoms;
- › Depressive moods;
- › Drug abusing behaviour;
- › Psychosomatic diseases;
- › Problems with self-esteem;
- › Problems in interpersonal relationships;
- › Material restrictions (e.g. due to inability to work)
- › Pregnancies;
- › Physical injuries or contagious diseases

What can you do?

Since there is no one typical reaction following sexualised violence, there is no single right way of treating the person affected either. It is important that the woman feels accepted and supported by the people in her environment.

A woman's self-determination is massively violated by an act of sexualised violence. This is why control and self-determination of her life is particularly important in the aftermath of the crime. This should be accepted. A well-meaning reaction (e.g. reporting the crime to the police, confronting the perpetrator) can sometimes be quite the opposite of what the woman wants. As a result, nothing should be decided without her permission.

Immediate help

- **Immediately after the crime, it is important to let the woman involved know she is now in a safe place.**
- **Pay close attention in order to understand just how much closeness is needed by the woman involved. If you are unsure, ask her what is helpful and what support she specifically wants. The need for closeness and distance may vary. Do not take this personally.**
- **It is important to believe the woman affected: do not doubt, and do not judge. Avoid "why-questions"; they might easily result in feelings of guilt being triggered or intensified.**
- **You should in any case act in accordance with the needs of the woman.**

Long-term

- **Let the woman concerned know that she can talk to you about what has happened. This is not about detailed descriptions of the crime, but about how the woman feels, what is on her mind and what frightens her. First of all, ask yourself whether you are able to bear the description.**
- **Important: Do also respect the woman's decision not to talk.**
- **If she wants to, accompany the woman to the police, doctor, lawyer or a specialised centre for abused women.**
- **Be patient and do not put pressure on the woman involved. Coming to terms with traumatic experiences may take a long time.**

If women feel secure and safe in their environment, they are more easily able to talk about what they have experienced and can thus come to terms with it in the long term as well.

Take care of yourself

- › People who are made aware of acts of violence of this kind, who have seen something or are taken into someone's confidence, often also suffer from shock. They might be acutely unable to cope with the situation.
- › Perhaps you don't know how to behave towards the woman, feel helpless, angry or sad. On no account should you unburden your own feelings onto the woman concerned.
- › Your ability to provide help has its own limits, too. Respect it, and ask for help.

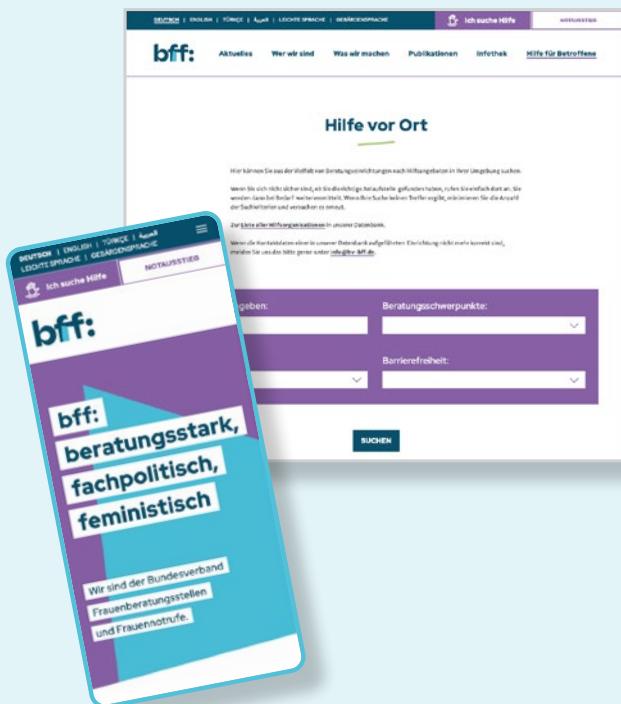


Here you will find support

Do not hesitate to contact a specialised centre for abused women if you are a supporting person or a relative and have any questions or need help. There are women's counselling centres and rape crisis centres across Germany, and there will be one available nearby.

You will find the addresses of specialised centres for abused women and further information on the homepage of the bff:

www.frauen-gegen-gewalt.de



The federal association of women's counselling centres and rape crisis centres (bff) is the umbrella organisation of specialised centres for abused women.

Our main focus lies on sexualised, physical and psychological as well as domestic violence. The bff currently represents approximately 170 specialised centres all over Germany.

Legal information



IMPORTANT: The decision about reporting a sexualised assault to the police must be made exclusively by the woman involved.

Rape and sexual coercion are **criminal offences liable to public prosecution**. This means that **as soon as the police or prosecution find out about the offence, they are obliged to investigate**. It also means that a criminal complaint cannot be withdrawn. **Unlike what is often assumed, nobody is obliged to report a rape to the police.**

Professional counselling can help reach an individual decision and clarify whether the sexualised assault falls under criminal law. During counselling, questions regarding the course of the criminal proceedings or periods of limitation can also be discussed.

Specialised centres for abused women offer consultation free of charge, along with information on possible next steps. They can also put you in contact with specialised lawyers. Many specialised centres for abused women also offer to accompany you to see a physician, a lawyer and the police, and can accompany you when you give evidence in court. They also provide information about the possibilities of securing evidence. **The women working in these specialised centres are bound by professional secrecy.**

This flyer was given to you by:

The nationwide Violence against Women support helpline offers initial counselling for people affected over the phone. Free of charge, confidential and round-the-clock.



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**Bundesverband Frauenberatungsstellen
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