

Self-help Guide for Women who are Victims of a Recent Sexual Assault:

A road to recovery

Third edition

Programme for the Prevention and Treatment of Psychological Sequelae in
Women Victims of Sexual Assault
Commission on Gender-Based Violence and Health at the Hospital Clínic
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To women victims of sexual violence for the courage of their testimonies and the trust placed in our work.

“... the term ‘violence against women’ means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution, 1993.

“Violence against women -particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence- is a major public health problem and a violation of women’s rights. It is rooted in and perpetuates gender inequalities”.

World Health Organization, 2021.

<https://www.who.int/es/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

A total of 13.7% of all the women aged 16 or over resident in Spain have suffered sexual violence at some point in their life, at the hands of a family member or another person.

Macro-survey by the Spanish Ministry of Equality, 2019.

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THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

This guide was prepared by a team of professionals committed to the specialized care of women who have suffered sexual violence. Through interdisciplinary intervention, the aim is to offer social and legal support to women, focusing on their physical, psychological and social needs.

Designed to provide women with the tools needed to regain control of their lives after sexual assault. Here they will find essential information on how to take care of themselves, how to access medical and psychological support, and to restore the areas of their lives that have been affected. The contents are based on clinical experience accumulated over years of caring for women victims of sexual violence, with the aim of sharing useful knowledge to support the recovery process.

For over 30 years, the Hospital Clínic Barcelona has been working in the field of immediate medical care and in the prevention and treatment of sequelae in women victims of sexual violence. It is important to remember that this violence becomes a traumatic experience that affects both the body and the mind. The immediate reactions can take many forms, from confusion and fear to emotional anguish, and can appear both immediately and in the long term. Therefore, it is essential to ensure that affected women receive specialized medical, psychological and social care and that their recovery is facilitated.

The guide offers advice regarding the first few days after the assault, as well as long-term recommendations, to help women understand their own reactions and find the most appropriate strategies for restoring their well-being. Support from friends and relatives can also be fundamental, and advice is provided for people who want to help the victim.

At the same time, the document is intended as a practical tool for women starting out on the road to recovery. The ultimate goal is to contribute to their physical, mental and social health, and to offer clear and accessible information on how to overcome the consequences of sexual assault, in the hope that each woman can find her own road to recovery.

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YOU HAVE RIGHTS

When you need advice, this guide will help you discover what your rights are and how you can exercise them. Furthermore, it is designed to provide support to people helping women who have suffered sexual violence.

Rights are only useful if we can use them. Is it understandable that legislation can sometimes appear cold and distant. Therefore, this guide was written in a clear and direct manner, telling you what you can do and how to do it. Here you will find useful information for situations in a hospital, as well as what you can ask the police, the courts and the legal support systems for when you need them. We also tell you where you can find help.

From a legal point of view, this guide aims to facilitate access to justice, not only as a legal obligation, but also as a road to recovery for women who have suffered sexual assault. This guide is aimed at women who have been victims of this type of assault, as well as those who are assisting them, whether they are professionals, family members or friends.

By knowing and exercising your rights, you can contribute to your own recovery and to the restoration of trust in our institutions. We are here to support you in this process.

Antonio Madrid Pérez, coordinator general of the Dret al Dret (Right to Law) Legal Clinic. Faculty of Law. University of Barcelona



INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is one of the most frequent forms of violence that has been perpetrated by men against women throughout history. It has been used in times of war and in times of peace to dominate, humiliate and control women by violating their body, mind and sexuality. Sexual assault is a serious crime against Human Rights, which threatens the freedom, dignity and physical and psychological integrity of the human being.

No one has the right to assault you. If you have been a victim of sexual assault and survived it, or think you might have been assaulted, these pages can help you deal with this traumatic situation.

Victims of sexual violence are never complicit or to blame.

WHAT IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE?

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as: “Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work”.

Sexual violence is any act that violates a woman’s sexual freedom or personal dignity, and is a manifestation of male violence since, although it affects both sexes, women are the most frequent victims, and men the aggressors.

Act 5/2008 on women’s right to eradicate gender-based violence, defines sexist violence and sexual harassment as:

Sexual violence: includes any act that violates a woman’s sexual freedom or personal dignity by creating conditions or taking advantage of a context that, directly or indirectly, impose a sexual practice without the consent or will of the woman, regardless of the bond between the woman and the aggressor or aggressors. It includes bodily access, genital mutilation or the risk of suffering it, forced marriages, trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, sexual threats, exhibition, observation and the imposition of any sexual practice, among other behaviours.

Sexual harassment: consists of any unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity and freedom of a woman or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, offensive or disturbing environment for her.

No one has the right to assault you. If you have been a victim of sexual assault and survived it, or think you might have been, these pages can help you deal with this traumatic situation.

WHAT CAN YOU DO AFTER A SEXUAL ASSAULT?

1. Go to a safe place, far away from the aggressor.
2. Immediately contact someone who can help you: a friend, relative, or the police. After the assault, you may feel overwhelmed or confused. The company of a person you can trust will help calm you down.
3. Prioritize looking after your health. Go to the A&E Department at the Hospital Clínic Barcelona as soon as possible, or to the nearest general hospital if you are in another town. Call 112 and they will tell you which hospital to go to, if you are outside of Barcelona. If you are under 16 years old, go to the A&E Department at the Vall d'Hebrón Hospital in Barcelona.
4. Keep any evidence of the assault, in case you want to report it later. Do not wash, drink or eat; do not brush your teeth or gargle; do not have a shower or change your clothes and, as far as possible, avoid urinating and defecating.
5. Seek advice from a lawyer specializing in sexual violence to find out your rights and if you intend to file a formal complaint (see the section of the guide on Rights).
6. For the first few days, it is best that you have someone to accompany you at home, or that you go to a friend's or family member's house. When you have the opportunity to do so, write about or record the assault in as much detail as possible. This will help you during any legal proceedings you decide to initiate.
7. Allow yourself to be helped. Remember that sexual assault is not your fault. Sexual assault is a crime and can happen to any woman. Recovery will be a process that will take time. During this time, you will have to look after yourself and be your own best friend.
8. After this traumatic event, it is important that you take care of your mental health, as it can be affected. You can always contact the Programme for the Prevention and Treatment of Psychological Sequelae in Women Victims of Sexual Assault at the Hospital Clínic Barcelona (see the information at the end of this guide, in the Addresses of Interest section).



DRUG-FACILITATED SEXUAL ASSAULTS

“[...] I was at a party, I had a few drinks; suddenly, I felt ill, very drunk, very sick, drinks had never had this effect on me before [...] I woke up in a strange place, with my clothes in a mess or naked, and with the feeling that someone had done something to me [...] I don’t remember anything from the moment I had that drink at the disco until I woke up about seven hours later in a strange bed [...] I don’t remember how I got home [...] I woke up confused and saw that I had blood between my legs, I felt ill, nauseous, sick, and had a headache [...] I went to the bathroom and when I looked in the mirror I saw I had wounds, inexplicable scratches [...] I found it hard to figure out what I had to do next [...]”.

What is meant by drug-facilitated sexual assault?

In what is known as drug-facilitated sexual assault (DFSA), the sexual assault is carried out after the voluntary or involuntary ingestion of mind-altering substances, such as alcohol and/or other drugs (alcohol is the most common). Due to their intoxicated state, the victim loses their ability to consent to sex or respond.

The aggressor may act opportunistically, taking advantage of the victim’s vulnerable state after voluntary consumption; or premeditatedly with the aggressor providing the victim with an incapacitating or disinhibiting substance in order to sexually subjugate her.

What can make you suspect that you have been the victim of drug-facilitated sexual assault?

Two types of indicator characterize the suspicion of having been a victim of DFSA: the suspicion of having been sexually assaulted, and of having been under the influence of a drug.

More specifically, things that can make you suspicious include:

- Feeling intoxicated in a way that does not correspond to the amount of alcohol or drugs consumed (“I’d never felt like this before after drinking”).
- Having accepted a drink from a stranger.
- Feeling unwell unexpectedly, with indigestion, nausea or vomiting.
- Suddenly feeling sleepier, sedated, with difficulty coordinating your thoughts and movements.
- Waking up the next day with memory gaps, a feeling of confusion and a hangover.
- Waking up next to a stranger, with the physical sensation of having had sexual relations.
- Waking up half-dressed or naked, noticing the unexplained presence of bodily fluids, bleeding or injuries in the genital area or elsewhere on the body.
- Having witnesses who say they saw you in compromising circumstances that you do not remember.
- Having toxins detected in both your urine and blood during a visit to the A&E department, even though a negative result does not allow us to rule out their presence.

What are the effects of the substances in drug-facilitated sexual assaults?

The consumption of alcohol and other drugs leads to a decrease in behavioural control, in the perception of dangerous situations, and in the ability to give consent and make decisions.

Acute alcohol intoxication affects brain functions, emotions and behaviour progressively; depending on the amount ingested, and causes states ranging from euphoria/disinhibition (approximately 0.5 g/l, which is the amount contained in two cans of beer), to a decrease in the level of consciousness with drowsiness, muscular relaxation, confusion, amnesia for 3-8 hours after ingestion, loss of balance and coma.

The aggressor uses different substances that, when mixed with alcoholic beverages or other beverages (tea, coffee, soft drinks), serve to sedate the victim, reduce her resistance and overpower her. Drugs impair the victim's ability to defend herself, and inhibit her fight-or-flight response.

Alcohol and psychoactive drugs affect the state of consciousness, and therefore:

- Consent.
- The defence response.
- The perception of danger.
- The memory of the facts.
- Behavioural control and decision-making.

What known substances are used to subdue victims?

Any substance that alters the victim's perception or level of consciousness can be used to reduce the victim's will and resistance. The substances that are used are generally central nervous system depressants, fast-acting, and short-lived, which is why they are beyond the victim's control and are difficult to detect. The substances used by the aggressor can be administered in the form of tea, coffee, soft drinks, or alcoholic beverages and change over the years. Alcohol is the most common.

How might you feel if you have been a victim of a drug-facilitated sexual assault?

"At home [...] I woke up feeling confused, I felt ill. It was hard for me to think about what to do next [...] I couldn't remember what had happen from a certain time onwards....".

If you think you have been a victim of sexual assault while under the influence of alcohol or other substances, it is common not to remember anything about this period of time and to feel helpless, confused, not know where you have been or how you got there, and you wonder what might have happened to you.

You might experience physical discomfort such as a headache, nausea, vomiting, gastrointestinal and vaginal discomfort, and also have physical signs of the assault. When you become aware of the sexual assault, you may feel guilty, ashamed, and think it is your fault and that you are not entitled to receive professional help.

Remember that being under the influence of alcohol or other substances does not constitute an invitation to be sexually assaulted.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO GET IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE?

Sexual assault has an impact on your health. You may experience a variety of physical and emotional symptoms of varying intensity. These symptoms can affect your general condition such as insomnia, anxiety, loss of appetite, muscle tension, headache, stomach pain or nausea, as well as specific gynaecological symptoms such as bleeding, vaginal discharge and a sensation of burning or itching in the genital area, and other complications.

A possible pregnancy must always be ruled out, and the likelihood of contracting a sexually transmitted disease must be assessed, in order to give the appropriate treatment (hepatitis, HIV, syphilis, candidiasis, and other diseases). Some treatments are started in the A&E department.

Even if you are not physically injured, it is important to take care of your emotional state after the assault, determine the risk of pregnancy and of having been infected with a sexually transmitted disease, and to obtain the necessary biological and clinical tests in case you want to report the assault. If you suspect that the aggressor administered any substance to you, report this to the medical staff who are treating you. The Hospital Clínic Barcelona protocol includes urine and blood toxicity tests. If you want to report the crime, make sure that the biological evidence and your belongings are collected. Some biological evidence, such as vaginal evidence, can be collected up to 10 days after the assault.

In all cases, the medical staff will prepare a medico-legal statement describing the emotional state you are in, the type of assault, the time of day and the place where it occurred, as well as the trauma, injuries, bruises and contusions observed. The hospital will send the medico-legal statement of the injuries to the corresponding duty magistrates' court (see the section of the guide on Rights).

If you are a minor and the sexual assault occurred in your immediate environment, involving a family member for example, it is very important that you are protected. You may feel especially judged or questioned by your social environment, which may have an opinion about what happened. The hospital will make sure that you feel supported and protected at all times.

WHAT DOES IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE CONSIST OF?

Once you have received information and you have given your consent, you will undergo the following clinical examinations: general examination, gynaecological and anal examination, complementary examinations including the detection of toxins in urine and blood, tests for the detection of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy, and the evaluation and care of your emotional state.

IF YOU WISH, YOU CAN BE ACCOMPANIED AT ALL TIMES.

Gynaecological examination:

The gynaecological examination is similar to a gynaecological check-up. Gynaecologists examine the external and internal (vaginal and anal) areas to look for any possible lesions. In the event of oral penetration, possible lesions to the oral mucosa and palate are looked for, and a buccal swab is collected for DNA testing. This will be included in the clinical report. Samples of semen and vaginal, anal and cervical fluids will also be collected. These examinations may be uncomfortable.

Complementary examinations:

Other possible examinations are aimed at obtaining evidence:

1. Fingernail scrapings. If the victim was able to scratch or touch the perpetrator, any material found under the nails can be matched with the aggressor, as can the victim's clothes and objects found at the scene of the assault. This can help identify the aggressor and/or the exact location of the assault.
2. Pubic hair examination. This examination includes combing the pubic area to look for and identify any hairs that might belong to the aggressor and help identify him.
3. Analysis of toxins in urine and blood. These days, many victims of sexual assault are under the influence of alcohol or other substances, consumed voluntarily or involuntarily. For this reason, it is necessary to include blood and urine tests in the victim's emergency care protocol, to determine the presence of alcohol and other substances, and find out whether the sexual assault was carried out under these circumstances. These results can provide information to the woman and, if necessary, significant data to clarify the facts during the judicial proceedings.

Tests for the detection of sexually transmitted diseases:

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are detected through blood tests.

The risk of contagion is evaluated with the intention of preventing the appearance of infectious diseases, both sexually transmitted and those derived from skin lesions, and a preventive protocol is applied, which consists, as appropriate, of the administration of:

- A tetanus vaccine.
- A hepatitis B vaccine.
- Prophylactic antiretroviral treatment, in the case of high or intermediate risk of HIV infection.
- Treatment for syphilis or gonorrhoea.
- Treatment for trichomoniasis.

The Hospital Clínic offers a clinical follow-up and analytical tests for six months after the sexual assault at the infectious diseases service (see the Addresses of Interest section).

Pregnancy test:

If there is a possibility of pregnancy, the hospital will administer the 'morning-after pill' to you.

It is important that you know—and bear in mind—that you will have to repeat the pregnancy test after 15 days.

In the event of pregnancy as a result of the assault, you can request an abortion, regardless of whether you have reported the assault or not. If you wish to request this, please talk to the A&E Department staff so that they can inform you of the procedures and refer you to the corresponding Gynaecology Service. If the pregnancy resulting from the assault is detected after treatment at the A&E Department, please contact the Programme for the Prevention and Treatment of Psychological Sequelae in Women Victims of Sexual Assault at the Hospital Clínic, and they will help you contact the Gynaecology Service at the same hospital.



Examination of the emotional state:

Sexual assault is a very stressful traumatic event, which in most women causes deep fear and intense emotional reactions of anxiety, confusion and shock. That is why, in hospital care, psychiatry will evaluate your emotional state and inform you of possible subsequent reactions.

You will be offered the most appropriate pharmacological treatment for the first few days, if necessary, and the possibility of a psychiatric and/or psychological follow-up in the Programme for the Prevention and Treatment of Psychological Sequelae in Women Victims of Sexual Assault during the following months (see the Addresses of Interest section).

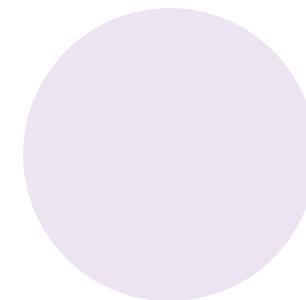
Forensic examination:

Provided you give your consent, the hospital will contact the duty magistrates' court, which will or will not order the presence of a forensic doctor in order to draw up the corresponding medico-legal report, based on the examination and collection of samples and/or pieces of clothing relevant to the judicial proceedings. In this case, the gynaecological or surgical, and the forensic examination with the collection of samples will be carried out jointly.

All the information obtained will be useful, if you decide to report the assault at some point.

After a sexual assault, you need to receive clinical care for:

- A possible pregnancy.
- Sexually transmitted diseases.
- Emotional distress and posttraumatic symptomatology.
- Obtaining clinical and biological samples.
- Wounds/trauma.



WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS IN THE FIRST FEW DAYS?

Sexual assault is a traumatic experience that threatens the physical and psychological integrity of the person assaulted, and your mind will respond to defend you from the assault. Therefore, during the first few weeks, you may experience unpleasant sensations, which are the normal adaptive response to an abnormal traumatic experience.

You might feel 'strange', different and a little confused; you may experience anxiety or bewilderment followed by anger and the feeling that you are losing control of your life. In the first few days, it is not unusual for victims to feel less hungry, to have problems sleeping and carrying out everyday activities. You may even feel uncomfortable in the presence of your relatives and close friends. Take some time to rest and ease back into your usual activities gradually. In the first few days, you might have to postpone your commitments and need to take refuge in a safe environment. Seek comfort and support from people who understand you.



It is important to seek specialized help to begin the road to recovery:

There is no need to panic, but it is important to seek specialized help. It is possible that, after two or three weeks, these acute sensations will slowly disappear until you feel better. However, frequently they do not get better. They can reappear later and recovery can be slower, the symptoms can interfere with your daily life, and/or you feel that you cannot get return to being the person you were before the assault.

In the first few days, you might have to postpone your commitments and need to take refuge in a safe environment. Seek comfort and support from people who understand you in order to begin the road to recovery.

You have already done what you could to overcome the assault, and it is advisable to get professional support quickly. The persistence of symptomatology can crystallize into a sustained state of anxiety, a depressive episode, a post-traumatic stress disorder, sexual dysfunction or substance abuse (alcohol or drugs).

In any case, specialized assistance will help reduce your pain and facilitate your recovery. We can offer you the specialized recovery programme. (See the Addresses of Interest section).

Symptoms that you may experience:

- Reliving the trauma.
- Fear and anxiety.
- A sense of unreality.
- Living in a permanent state of alert.
- Avoidance.
- Sadness, despair and anger.
- Guilt, shame.
- Changes in one's self-image.
- Changes in one's daily routine.
- Self-harming behaviour.
- Alcohol and other substance abuse

Reliving the trauma:

"[...] I keep thinking about what happened [...] I can't get it out of my head [...] I keep on reliving it again and again, even though I don't want to [...] I see his face all the time [...] I notice how he grabs me by the wrists [...], his smell [...] I hear the words he said to me [...] I have nightmares [...]"

You are not going mad or losing control, your mind is just playing tricks on you. Time and again the memory of the assault appears in the form of thoughts, images, sensations or perceptions. These memories appear involuntarily, even if they are unwanted. Sometimes, they provoke feelings of intense fear, vulnerability, helplessness, anger, sadness or guilt. Sometimes, you experience very real memories and see very real images, as if you were going back in time and revisiting the assault (flashbacks). This causes a great deal of confusion and disorientation.

Another way of reliving the assault, at night, and whilst you are sleeping, is through nightmares, which reproduce the assault or have a symbolic content of danger, threat or feeling trapped.

Bear in mind that reliving the trauma in the form of feelings, smells, thoughts, memories, images or pain is, in part, an attempt by our brain to make sense of the experience and integrate what happened.

Fear and anxiety:

“[...] I’m scared all day long [...] What if I’ve got pregnant...? And what if I’ve been infected with some disease...? I’m scared of dying, of being alone at home, of the rapist coming back [...]”

“[...] I have panic attacks. I can’t breathe! I can’t stop moving [...] I can’t sit still in class [...]”

These emotions are common in situations of danger or threat. The fear and anxiety that can be experienced when faced with objects or situations that remind the victim of or are associated with the assault. For example, when the victim comes across similar people or places, when they find similar smells, tastes, colours or experiences, or even the same time of the day when the assault occurred. Previously neutral or positive stimuli can now trigger an intense feeling of fear or anxiety because they are associated with the memory of the assault.

Bear in mind that worry and anxiety are a defensive reaction to a threatening event.

Sense of unreality:

“[...] That can’t be true [...] Did that really happen? [...] Did I imagine it or was it a dream? [...] Why me? [...] Maybe I’m making too much of a fuss. In reality, it wasn’t that bad and he didn’t want to hurt me [...] When I look at myself in the mirror, I don’t recognize myself [...] Why am I so calm? [...] Why can’t I cry? [...]”

During the first few days, you may wonder whether the assault really happened. It is hard to accept what has happened, any help is avoided and nothing is said to anyone. Sometimes, in an attempt to return to normal life, the activities prior to the assault are repressed, with the victim thinking, “nothing happened really”, “I’m fine, it’s all over now”, the subject is not mentioned, and help from professionals and close friends and family is rejected.

If this sense of unreality continues, you should seek help, so that it does not remain with you and affect other areas of your life.

Living in a permanent state of alert:

“[...] When I walk along the street, I feel insecure, vulnerable [...] I can’t stand anyone walking behind me [...] When the telephone rings, I jump out of my chair and my heart starts racing [...] I am easily startled [...] I get scared by any noise, and if someone walks behind me or touches me on the back [...] I wake up anxious at night, but I don’t remember what I dreamt about [...]”

After sexual assault, the body’s alarm or self-protection system is activated and remains activated, as if the danger could reappear at any moment. This creates the feeling of living in a constant and sustained state of alert. It is not surprising that you are easily startled, impatient or irritable or that you have problems concentrating or sleeping, that you feel insecure, uneasy and are constantly afraid, even in safe places. Physical symptoms of muscular tension, tremors, sweating, tachycardia and shortness of breath are common. All these reactions allow us to be ready at all times to respond to any situation of danger, but they are exhausting if they are prolonged over time and make it very difficult to organize ourselves and make decisions like we did before the assault.

When a woman is sexually assaulted she is constantly alert and vigilant. It is our body’s reaction that exhausts us but protects us at the same time. Once the threat has passed, it is no longer necessary to maintain it, but sometimes our body remains on alert, even though the danger has gone.




Avoidance:

“[...] Since it happened, I’ve been stuck at home, I don’t go out with anyone [...] I can’t have relationships with men. I can’t go past where it happened [...] I can’t enter any enclosed place [...] I avoid going out at night [...]”.

Avoiding everything that has to do with sexual assault is a way of managing the fear and the feeling of being in danger. The victim usually avoids everything that reminds them directly or indirectly of the sexual assault, such as the place where it occurred, people similar to the aggressor, and going out in the evening if the assault happened at night.

They also avoid thinking about what happened or speaking about it in order not to feel pain. The need to withdraw from emotions and feelings, both negative and positive, makes the victim feel distant, and isolated from the people they love, from whom they need to receive support and affection.




When thoughts and feelings are very painful, the mind blocks them, so that some of parts of the assault are not remembered; this is known as post-traumatic amnesia. The traumatic memory can be recovered spontaneously or during the therapeutic process.

Sadness, despair and anger:

Depression: *“Nothing makes me happy [...] I feel very sad and I don’t know why [...] I no longer enjoy anything [...] I feel so helpless [...] It would be better to disappear [...] Maybe I’d be better off dead [...] Things will never be the same again [...]”.*

Inefficiency or loss of control: *“Will I ever be able to take control of my life again? I think I’m going to go mad [...]”.*

After the first few days, when you realize how badly you have suffered, you may feel sad and cry frequently, your interest in people and activities may have diminished and your plans for the future may have disappeared. The world around you may seem different, greyer, less friendly, and you no longer trust people. Your conception of the world has changed. You may feel like you are now living in a different world that is no longer predictable or controllable. You have lost the feeling of safety and trust, and you may feel that, after the assault, you are more vulnerable and defenceless. Sadness is the expression of everything you feel you lost after the assault.



The sadness can easily alternate with feelings of anger, not only towards the aggressor, but also towards other people close to you. If you are not used to feeling angry or annoyed, you may feel very confused by your hostile, irritable and even aggressive behaviour towards others, especially towards the people closest to you. It is not easy to manage this without losing control. Relationships with others become intense and it is difficult to achieve intimacy. This can easily confuse those close to you who want to help you.

Guilt, shame:

"[...] I feel as if it were my fault [...] I deserve what happened to me [...] Maybe I did something to make it happen [...] They won't believe me [...] What will people think? [...] I can't tell my family or friends [...]"

Other people might revictimize you by blaming you and criticizing your behaviour: "You shouldn't have been there", "You should have defended yourself", "That's what happens for being the way you are [...] for having drunk [...] for dressing like that", "Nothing like that would ever happen to me", "Why didn't you defend yourself?", "What did you do to make him approach you?"

You may feel ashamed and feel the need to hide the facts from other people. These feelings of guilt can last until other symptoms have disappeared and make it difficult to recover emotionally, rebuild your self-esteem, and seek assistance or support.

You should remember that guilt can be understood as an attempt to regain a certain sense of power and control.

It doesn't matter how the assault happened or why.
It doesn't matter whether you consumed alcohol or drugs, where you were or what relationship you had with the aggressor.

No one has the right to attack you.

**YOU ARE NOT GUILTY.
IT IS A CRIME.
IT CAN HAPPEN TO YOU, AND HAPPEN TO ANY WOMAN.
IT IS NEVER YOUR FAULT.
IT IS A CRIMINAL OFFENCE THAT CAN BE REPORTED.**

Changes in how you see yourself:

"[...] I am a bad person [...] I don't like the way I am [...] I don't like my body [...] I feel dirty [...]"

There may be a before and after in terms of the image you had of yourself. You may feel like a different person, less confident in yourself. You may feel that your body is not the same and that you have become responsible for the assault. You may dislike looking at yourself in the mirror, dressing and grooming and taking care of yourself as you did before the assault.

Changes in the daily routine:

"[...] I feel unable to go to work [...] I can't manage to get up to go to class [...] I don't feel like going out or being with people [...] I don't let my partner go near me [...] I no longer trust my friends like before [...]"

For the first few days, your daily routine may be disrupted. Your body needs to recover. Be kind to yourself. Do not hesitate to go and see health professionals.

Self-harming behaviour:

"[...] I'm so anxious and upset that I feel the need to self-harm, to cut myself [...] And by doing that manage to calm down for a while [...]"


For some women, engaging in self-harm or cutting themselves is a way to alleviate the emotional discomfort, intense anxiety and anguish that appears after sexual assault. If you feel very anxious and the need to engage in self-harm, remember that you are using a dysfunctional and harmful strategy in order to alleviate your suffering. You need to seek help to find other strategies to calm your anxiety without hurting yourself.



Abuse of alcohol and other substances:

“[...] I need to escape, alcohol and cannabis will help me to disconnect and feel better [...] Since the sexual assault, I need to drink and use cannabis [...] They relax me and help me to stop thinking about what happened [...] I feel like a bad person, and it doesn't matter what happens to me [...]”.

After the sexual assault, you may notice that you start to consume alcohol, or use other substances, or increase your consumption. This need to increase consumption is a consequence of the change in self-control, impulses and the ability to plan and control behaviour. These are symptoms that can occur after a traumatic event, such as sexual assault. You may think that these substances will help reduce the discomfort, the reliving of the trauma, the anxiety, and help you forget the sexual assault. However, this form of self-medication will worsen your state of health, self-image and self-confidence and, at the same time, you will feel more ashamed and guilty. If you feel the need to consume and have difficulty controlling consumption, we recommend you seek professional help.



WHAT CAN YOU DO TO RECOVER?

- 1. Immerse yourself in a safe and pleasant environment.** Look for a safe place where you feel comfortable and well supported. Sometimes, you may need to move to a relative's or a friend's house, especially if you live alone or if the aggressor knows your address. Whenever possible, make sure you are supported by people who know how to respect your privacy. Avoid isolating yourself and situations of inactivity or loneliness that encourage the appearance of unpleasant feelings and guilty thoughts.
- 2. Ask for specialized support, preventive interventions and effective treatments.** We always recommend victims do this, and as early as possible. In particular, if four weeks after the assault you are still experiencing intense emotional reactions and finding it difficult to get back to your daily routine. Social, psychological, clinical and psychiatric intervention may be the key to preventing the onset of disorders such as post-traumatic stress, depression or substance abuse. Recovery is a gradual and sometimes slow process. Do not give up or get discouraged. Treatments and interventions take time. You will gradually feel better and regain control of your life.
- 3. Seek support from other people** and, if necessary, talk about what has happened. Understanding, affection and the company of people you are close to are some of the most effective resources for overcoming difficult situations. However, if you find that talking is emotionally draining and you prefer to distract yourself and resume your daily life, go ahead: it is a natural protective reaction.

4. Establish a self-care plan for the next few weeks. Rest and try to maintain your sleep and wake schedule; don't change your sleep habits. Eat regular, balanced meals, every three hours, even if only in small amounts. Limit the amount of time you spend watching TV. Try not to read books or watch programmes with any violent content in general. Exercise to reduce muscle tension, improve your mood and help you sleep. Avoid consuming alcohol and stimulating beverages such as coffee, tea or cola, as they will make you more anxious and prevent you sleeping. Do not resort to consuming toxic substances to alleviate your discomfort; they can cause health problems and interfere with recovery. Do not take any medication without first consulting your doctor.

5. Find out about the psychological reactions experienced after a sexual assault. This will help you understand your behaviour, identify the resources you have and recognize the enormous effort you are making to overcome everything and move forward.

6. Gradually expose yourself to situations that remind you of the assault. Do not avoid them, as the relief will be short-lived and you will find it increasingly difficult to face them. If at first you are afraid to go out into the street or to face situations that remind you of the assault, increase the behaviours aimed at feeling more protected and make sure someone accompanies you when you go out.

Some women feel safer if they carry a personal defence spray with them. If you want to buy one, check the brand and the point of sale with the police first, because it must be approved by the Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs.

In order to recover, seek specialized medical and psychological care and let yourself be helped by family and friends.

Some situations have been shown to be associated with the development of post-traumatic disorders following sexual assault:

- When the victim suffered other emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse as a child.
- When the victim does not receive support from family and friends.
- When the victim suffered a very violent assault in which she was especially afraid for her life.
- When the victim received psychological or psychiatric treatment before the assault.
- When the victim receives subsequent threats from the aggressor.
- When the aggressor belongs to the victim's social circle (relative, friend, work colleague or classmate).
- When the victim is living outside her country of origin.



What can family and friends do to help her?

If someone in your immediate environment has been sexually assaulted, it is important that those around them are prepared to help them cope with the situation. Reading the guide can also help you to understand how they are feeling and to give them the support they need.

It is advisable to maintain an empathetic, warm and calm approach. Do not blame her, judge her behaviour or her way of doing things or her lifestyle, and do not question or challenge her. Show affection and availability.

Do not pressure her to talk about the facts and do not ask for details. Respect her privacy and adopt a discreet and respectful attitude. There are women who do not need to talk about the facts. Silence and distraction, with the passing of time and return to daily life, are sometimes a useful initial strategy for maintaining emotional balance and in order to recover.

Encourage and support her when she resumes her usual activities, without pressuring her.

Offer assistance and support for daily activities and look for solutions to immediate problems.

Encourage her to seek professional help and accompany her to make the first contacts and visit specialized services. It may be useful to have an agenda for appointments.

Help her establish a safe environment and a protection plan if the aggressor is someone she knows and belongs to her family, work or school environment or circle of friends. If she receives direct threats from the aggressor, seek a response from the professional team that is intervening.

Offer to accompany her to file the complaint, when she decides to do so.

The parents of a teenage girl who has suffered sexual violence can do a lot to help her.

She will need your support to recover her physical, psychological and social well-being. There are different things that you can do:

- **Listen** and believe what she tells you without interrupting, even if the details are inconsistent or incomplete. Avoid asking “why?”. Let her talk about how she feels. Do not judge her. Do not blame or criticize her. Do not interrogate her. Treat her in a natural, friendly way, be there for her, and try to keep her company, especially in the first few days. This will provide a trusting environment in which she feels safe.
- **Keep calm**, even though you may experience emotions such as anger, irritability, worry or guilt for not having been able to protect her. Eliminate her feelings of guilt and your own. Remember that the only one to blame is the aggressor.
- **Ask her how you can help her.** Accompany her in all the activities and actions that derive from the assault.

If you have any doubts or feel confused, you can also contact professionals to help you manage the situation with your daughter (*you can find the addresses at the end of this guide*).

If the aggressor is a known person or from the victim's environment—for example a relative or friend—look for a safe environment away from the aggressor and a protection plan seeking support from specialized professionals (police, healthcare, legal).

Read carefully the section in this guide that covers the most common psychological reactions during the first few days. This will allow you to understand how the victim feels, to identify warning signs and the need for specialized support.

Remember that recovery is a gradual and slow process

WHAT ARE YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS AND ACTIONS?

Remember that sexual assault IS A CRIME and you have the right to have the aggressor tried by the courts and, if appropriate, convicted, in addition to your right to obtain compensation for the damage caused. Therefore, it is important that you report the aggressor. However, criminal proceedings are long and complex.

What is consent?

The granting of sexual consent must be based on freedom and remain in force throughout the entire sexual act. Consent is only valid if it has been given freely and through acts that clearly express this wish.

Therefore, there is no consent when the aggressor abuses trust, intimidates and uses violence to impose a sexual practice without taking the women's wishes into account.

Nor is there valid consent when people do not have sufficient capacity for the correct exercise of will (minors under 16 years of age, or people with mental disabilities), nor when their will is rendered null and void for whatever reason, because they are in a state of intoxication, fear or unconscious.

I have the right both to report it and not to report it:

Although it is the obligation of health professionals to communicate to the courts a health problem linked to the perpetration of a crime, no criminal proceedings will be opened without your formal complaint. Your formal complaint will be what initiates the procedure to judge the aggressor. If you are a minor, however, the criminal proceedings can be initiated ex officio. If you decide to report the incident, do so accompanied by your lawyer. From that moment on, follow their guidance and advice. Report any situation related to the assault, such as any memories you may have, new leads on the aggressor, and consult the lawyer as much as you need to.

Before filing a formal complaint, get advice from a lawyer specialized in sexual violence (legal proceedings, costs, duration, probabilities of the complaint being successful).

When can I file a formal complaint?

You can decide to file the complaint straight after receiving medical and legal assistance, or later on.

You have time, but we recommend that, if you want to file a formal complaint, you do not take too long. Meanwhile, **keep all the evidence you have**: mobile phone and social media messages, screenshots, voice notes and video recordings, information from possible witnesses, etc. Make back-up copies of this information. **Write down everything you remember**, try to keep all your notes together, so that they are easy to find and to know when you wrote them.

The statute of limitations for sexual assault crimes is long - several years. Please seek advice about the number of years you have for reporting the offence, depending on the type of assault you suffered. Bear in mind that the time you have to file a complaint may be taken into account by the judicial authority when assessing your credibility.

If the aggressor is a stranger, the report can be used to locate him.

When you get advice, go to see the lawyer accompanied by someone you trust, and provide the lawyer with all the evidence you have kept and that you think may be useful.

Filing a formal complaint can be good for you, and for other women too. Get advice and then decide freely.

What does it mean to file a formal complaint?

When you file a formal complaint, an investigation (preliminary enquiry) begins, in order to demonstrate whether there is sufficient evidence or proof of the crime to continue the proceedings and open an oral trial. The proceedings can be dropped or dismissed, if it is considered that there is no evidence.

When filing the formal complaint at the police station or the duty magistrates' court, you have the right to request protection measures, which will be decided on by the judicial authority, so that the accused does not go near you or communicate with you. If you are denied protection measures, you can appeal for a review and/or an appeal.

Do I need to have a lawyer for the proceedings?

As the aggrieved and injured party, the victim of a crime, you can be a party to the proceedings. This means you can have a lawyer in the proceedings to act as a private prosecutor, presenting evidence and pressing charges on your behalf. It is highly recommended that you do so. Becoming a private prosecutor can give you a sense of security, as you have direct information about the proceedings, and someone who looks after your interests directly. If not, the court will only inform you of the definitive resolutions of the proceedings.

How to access free justice

If you are not accompanied by a lawyer you trust, at the police station they will offer you the legal assistance of the court-appointed lawyer in order to file the formal complaint (Organic Law 10/2022).

After filing the complaint, you will only be entitled to free legal aid if you do not have sufficient financial resources to litigate.

Check to see whether you are entitled to free legal aid by contacting the bar association's' legal advice services or the courts. You can also apply for this right at the same places, filling out a form and providing certain financial documentation.

More information on the right to free legal aid:

https://seujudicial.gencat.cat/ca/que_cal_fer/orientacio_juridica/

How many times will I have to testify?

The criminal proceedings have two phases. The first phase is the investigation, and this is carried out in the Magistrates' Court of the location where the events occurred. The second phase is the oral trial, which is carried out in the Criminal Court or the Provincial Court, depending on the severity of the crime. In both phases, you will have to testify and answer questions asked by the judicial authority and the parties, as well as by the aggressor's lawyer. You will also be asked to collaborate with the police to identify the aggressor or to be examined by medical or forensic psychology professionals, if necessary.

What can I do to prepare for the oral trial?

The oral trial is usually one of the most critical moments, since it can make you feel very fragile and scared.

The trial is not your responsibility. Do not put pressure on yourself. The legal operators must do their job and those who have to work for the conviction of the aggressor are the prosecutors, both the public prosecutor and your lawyer, if you have one.

All you have to do is to testify about what you experienced. Ask your lawyer for information about what the trial will be like and prepare your statement ahead of time. At the trial, you will have to state the facts as clearly as possible, and all the details you remember. You will have to respond as precisely as you can about the objective facts that you recall perfectly and that form the core of the assault. It is important that your account remains consistent in your statements during the formal complaint, the investigation and the oral trial.

What happens if I recall different things in my statements?

In traumatic events, it is normal to have memory gaps, amnesia, flashbacks and memories that appear over time. If you have already testified in court, talk to your lawyer, if you have one, about whether it would be advisable to expand on the official complaint or to incorporate new facts or details in your statement to the court.

If necessary, seek advice



When do the proceedings end? The sentence:

Justice is slow, and the proceedings will no doubt take years. If in the first part of the investigation it is considered that there is not enough evidence of a crime, the proceedings may be archived or dismissed.

If the case goes to an oral trial, the judgement may be a conviction—in which case the aggressor is declared guilty and sentenced—or an acquittal, where the court determines that the reported offences were not sufficiently proven.

In both cases, there is a right to appeal. This means that the final judgement, which can no longer be appealed and must be executed, takes several years to be issued.

In the event of archiving or acquittal, it is important that you understand that the criminal proceedings follow rules with guarantees of presumption of innocence, and this does not mean that what you experienced and reported was not true. You, better than anyone, know what you went through.

How can I get compensation for the damages suffered?

You have the right to claim for damages. Therefore, it is important that you bring to the proceedings any clinical or psychological reports you may have, as well as the documents accrediting your sick leave, if appropriate. You will only receive this compensation if the aggressor is convicted. Compensation amounts are usually low and can only be collected if the aggressor is solvent.

If the aggressor is convicted, you will be entitled to be reimbursed for the costs of the proceedings, except in cases of legal aid. If the aggressor is acquitted, and you are not entitled to legal aid, you will not recover the costs generated in the processing of the proceedings.

What employment rights do I have?

In addition to legal advice, we recommend you contact the union representatives or your company's occupational health department to find a solution to your employment situation during the time it takes to recover. In any case, in order to exercise your employment rights and receive benefits and allowances, you will have to prove that you have suffered sexual violence through the means provided by the law (see the section of the guide on Accrediting Victim Status).

In order to facilitate your recovery, you can ask your employer for your working hours or working day to be adapted, to work from home or for a temporary transfer to another workplace in the company. You can also request a reduction in the working day that involves a reduction in your salary.

Am I entitled to sick leave to take care of my health?

If you are signed off on sick leave, your employment contract is suspended while you recover your physical and/or mental health in order to return to work. During this period, known as temporary disability, you do not have to work, you keep your job and, meanwhile, you can receive a benefit in lieu of your salary, if you have six months of social security contributions.



Am I entitled to any financial compensation for the assault?

You will be entitled to financial aid and benefits; if you can prove you are a victim and that your income—or that of the family members with whom you live—does not exceed a certain threshold (normally the minimum wage). Likewise, as a victim, if you do not have sufficient income, you can participate in paid labour market integration programmes (Active Insertion Income). In all these cases, you do not need to have worked or have paid social security contributions previously. Consult the services and information points indicated in the guide and, more specifically, the Generalitat's Employment Offices.

If, as a result of the sexual assault, you lose your job or you decide to terminate the employment of your own accord, you are entitled to claim unemployment benefits provided you have made the required social security contributions.

How are my data protected during clinical care?

During clinical care, your privacy and the protection of your personal data are assured. This means that this information must be strictly protected by the health service and cannot be disclosed to third parties. Healthcare personnel are obliged to report the crime to the judicial authorities, and are also obliged to maintain professional secrecy, to protect your privacy and confidentiality, collaborating with the justice system when necessary, for example as experts.

The collection of **samples and evidence that can prove the sexual assault** will always be carried out with your consent, after receiving all the information on how the examination will be carried out and what it will be used for.



I AM UNDER 18 YEARS OLD, WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME?

Am I responsible for what happened to me?

No. You must remember that you are not responsible for what happened to you. The guilty party is the aggressor. The people you talk to should not judge you.

Do I have to go to hospital accompanied by my mother or father?

No, you do not need to. You can go alone or accompanied by a trusted person of your choice. What you should bear in mind is that the hospital has the obligation to report the incident to the Duty Court and to the Juvenile Prosecutor's Office, which will contact your mother or father or legal guardians. So, we recommend you tell them what happened. You can do so once you have attended the Hospital Clínic follow-up Programme for the Prevention and Treatment of Psychological Sequelae in Women Victims of Sexual Assault, where the professional team will support and advise you and will contact your mother, father or legal guardian(s).

Can I file the formal complaint myself with the Mossos d'Esquadra (Catalan police force)?

Yes, you can. However, we recommend you do this accompanied by a lawyer and someone you can trust. The police have a specialized unit, the central juvenile unit, attached to the Juvenile Prosecutor's Office (Ciutat de la Justícia – City of Justice) where you can file the complaint. You can also go to any police station or the Duty Court.

If I don't want to go home because the sexual assault was committed within the family, what will happen?

If the aggressor is at home and you can avoid going there, the option of staying with other family members or friends will be considered. When the assaults are perpetuated by people within your intimate family circle, the situation is risky and you should explain this to the team taking care of you, in order to study the options to guarantee your safety.

I AM A FOREIGNER OR MIGRANT, WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?

I am a foreigner or migrant with a resident permit; do I have the same rights?

Yes, you have the same employment and social rights as nationals. You can file a lawsuit at the police station or the court with the help of an interpreter, and you have the right to a court-appointed lawyer. The same employment rights are also recognized: a reduction in working hours, transfers, temporary disability, unemployment, and minimum insertion income.

Can filing a lawsuit or a formal complaint prevent me from renewing my residence permit?

No, filing a formal complaint or a lawsuit will not have any negative consequences or effects on the renewal of residence permits. The filing of a lawsuit does not imply the existence of a criminal record for the person filing the formal complaint or lawsuit.

If I am in an irregular situation, in other words undocumented, can I still file a formal complaint?

Yes, people who have suffered a sexual assault have the right to file a formal complaint at a police station and to a lawsuit. Under no circumstances can this formal complaint lead to the initiation of expulsion proceedings.



ACCREDITING VICTIM STATUS

Administrative accreditation of being a victim of gender-based or sexist violence can be obtained without the obligation to report it.

This accreditation will be used to gain access to legally recognized benefits and benefits for victims of gender-based violence and is effective throughout Spain.

In the event of recognition through legal means—such as a conviction, protection order, or active precautionary measures—it will not be necessary to provide administrative proof.

If you want to obtain accreditation, you can go to the Social Services in your district, to the Women's Support and Information Points (Punts d'Informació i Atenció a la Dona, PIAD) or the intervention services specialized in gender-based violence.

Accrediting victim status means having a document stating officially that you were a victim of gender-based violence.



ADDRESSES OF INTEREST:

Hospital Clínic de Barcelona. A&E Department

C/ Villarroel, 170. 08036 Barcelona

Telephone: 93 227 54 00 Extension: 2137

Hospital Vall d'Hebron. A&E Department (under 16 years old)

Pg. de la Vall d'Hebron, 129. 08035 Barcelona

Telephone 93 489 30 00 / 93 274 60 00

Health services specialized in the treatment of victims of sexual assault:

Programme for the Prevention and Treatment of Psychological Sequelae in Women Victims of Sexual Assault

c/ Rosselló, 140, baixos – 08036 Barcelona

Telephone: 629 634 553

Psychiatry and Psychology Service. Hospital Clínic. Barcelona

Infections Service at the Hospital Clínic de Barcelona

Outpatients building 5th floor c/ Rosselló, 161. 08036 Barcelona

Telephone: 93 227 55 26

CatSalut – Salut Respon (helpline for medical emergencies)

Telephone: 061

Mossos d'Esquadra (autonomous police force in Catalonia)

Telephone: 112

Oficines d'Atenció a la Víctima del Delicte (Victim Support Service)

- Mossos d'Esquadra

Guàrdia Urbana de Barcelona (Barcelona city police force)

Telephone: 092

Programa «TE ACOMPAÑAMOS» (labour insertion programme)

Jutjat de Guàrdia (Duty Court)

Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, 111. Edificio I. 08075 Barcelona

Telephone: 93 554 86 42

WEBSITES OF INTEREST:

Ilustre Colegio de la Abogacía de Barcelona (Barcelona Bar Association)

C/ Mallorca, 283 - 08037 Barcelona

Telephone: 93 496 18 80

www.icab.es

Free legal aid service

Telephone: 93 432 90 09

Av. Carrilet, 3. Edificio D. 1ª planta - 08902 Hospitalet de Llobregat.

Free legal aid and public defender service specialized in gender-based violence

www.gencat.cat

Oficina de atención a la víctima del delito (OAVD) (Victim Support Service)

Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, 111. Edificio I. 3ª planta.

08075 Barcelona.

Telephone: 900 12 18 84

Free service provided by the Department of Justice of the Generalitat de Catalunya, which offers assistance, support and advice to victims of crime. Coordination point for protection orders for victims of domestic violence, adopted by the judicial bodies in Catalonia.

atenciovictima.dji@gencat.net

Social and community services:

Telephone number for women victims of violence: 900 900 120

Generalitat de Catalunya information and assistance hotline: 012

City Council information helpline: 010

Centre d'Urgències i Emergències Socials de Barcelona (CUESB)
(Barcelona Social and Welfare Emergency Centre)

C/ Llacuna, 25. 08005 Barcelona

Telephone: 900 703 030 - Horario de atención: 24 horas

Open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year Municipal service for emergency social care outside the usual opening hours of Barcelona's other social services. - www.bcn.cat

Servei d'Atenció, Recuperació i Acol·lida (SARA) (Assistance, Recovery and Reception Service)

C/ Marie Curie, 16. 08042 Barcelona - Telephone: 900 922 357

E-mail: sara@bcn.cat

Municipal service providing comprehensive care to women, children and adolescents victims of gender-based violence, and to people from the victim's circle directly affected by this violence.

www.bcn.cat/dona

Punts d'Informació i Atenció a la Dona (PIAD) (Women's Support and Information Points) - Barcelona City Council

Ten municipal services that offer information, assistance and advice to women. Telephone: 010.

www.bcn.cat/dona

Servei d'Atenció Socioeducativa - (Socio-educational Care Service) - ABITS Agency

Municipal comprehensive care service for women who work as prostitutes and victims of sexual exploitation. It offers social, health, employment and/or legal advice, as well as psychological assistance.

Telephone: 900 722 200

www.bcn.cat/dona

Associacions and foundations:

Associació Assistència a Dones Agredides Sexualment (AADAS)

[Association for the Assistance of Sexually Assaulted Women]

Telephone: 93 487 57 60

www.aadas.org



