**HANDOUT 15C.2 KEY MESSAGES TO SHARE WITH SEXUAL VIOLENCE SURVIVORS**

Providing survivors with accurate information about sexual violence and its impact can help reduce their self-blame and shame, and can help them better cope with what happened. It will be helpful to provide the following information:

* An explanation of what sexual violence is, why it happens and who perpetrates it
* How survivors may feel after the incident(s), common reactions and normalizing these reactions
* Survivors’ tendencies to remain silent about abuse

Key messages you may want to share with survivors are provided below. **Remember that this is just suggested language; you will have to adapt the messages according to your context, the type of sexual violence experienced and the age of the survivor.**

**What sexual violence is:**

* Sexual violence is any sexual act that is forced or that someone is made to do when they do not want to. There are many forms of sexual violence, for example, harassing comments made towards you that are sexual, being exploited for sex, being forced to do something sexual that you do not want to do, having parts of your body touched without your consent, and being forced to have sex when you did not want to (rape).

**Why sexual violence happens:**

* Sexual violence happens because of the perpetrator’s need to control, humiliate and harm. Perpetrators use sexual violence as a weapon to hurt and dominate others. Sexual violence does not happen because men have sexual urges they cannot control.
* The perpetrator can be someone you know, like your relative, a close family friend or someone trusted in the community. Or it could be a complete stranger. Most of the time it is someone you know and trust. Perpetrators take advantage of the fact that you may already know and trust them in order to bring you closer to them and to keep you silent. It is part of the abuse.
* It is important to remember that sexual violence also happens in intimate relationships, including marriage. It is often one of the ways abusers humiliate, torture and control.
* Sexual violence can happen to all types of people—rich or poor, educated or not educated, married or unmarried.
* The important thing to remember is that being sexually assaulted is not your fault; it’s not about what you look like, what you wore, or anything that you did or did not do.

**How you may feel:**

* You may have many different feelings. The different feelings are confusing and hard to understand. You can often feel opposite feelings at the same time. It’s ok to have a lot of different feelings about what happened and about the person who has abused or assaulted you, especially if it is your husband or someone you knew well and trusted.
* It is common to feel a sense of shame, guilt and helplessness. You may feel that you cannot trust anyone anymore and that the world is not safe. These feelings can be difficult. It makes sense that you feel them given what you have gone through.
* It is common to be in shock, and you may not be able to fully grasp what has happened.
* All of the feelings you have—whether anger, guilt, fear, love, hope, hopelessness, sadness, shame, confusion—are common and okay for you to feel.
* Sometimes these feelings affect how you behave. You may feel scared all of the time and like you cannot trust anyone. You may feel sad all of the time and want to cry. You may feel nothing or feel ‘numb.’ And you may not want to talk to anyone.
* You may also feel very distrustful of others and like you are always vulnerable to something else bad happening.
* Talking about the feelings you are having and how they are affecting you with someone who is a good listener and can comfort you can be helpful.

**Why many survivors do not tell someone what happened:**

* There are many reasons why people do not tell anyone they have been assaulted.
* Sometimes the perpetrator threatens you and says things like, “If you tell anyone, I’ll hurt you,” or they threaten to hurt your children or other people in your family. And so you may be afraid of more violence or abuse if you do tell someone.
* The abuser/perpetrator may tell you that no one will believe you if you tell. And you may begin to believe that this is true.
* Sometimes you don’t tell anyone because you are ashamed, embarrassed or afraid that you may get in trouble.
* Telling someone about what has happened to you takes a lot of courage and strength. It is a brave step that can also feel scary and confusing. The first step in getting help is to tell someone.