



Overview Paper

Violence Against Women with Disabilities

National Clearinghouse on Family Violence

The Meaning of Disability

Historically, disability has been defined in terms of an individual's characteristics and his or her ability to perform the functions of daily living.¹ According to Statistics Canada, the term "disability" refers to difficulty performing the activities of daily living, a physical or intellectual difficulty or a health issue that reduces one's level of activity. This description is problematic in that it situates ability in the context of a presumed standard of what is "normal" daily living. In fact, each individual's concept of normality is unique.

Disability is based not so much on individual impairments as on the degree to which society recognizes and accommodates the individual differences of its citizens. Disability activists argue that social attitudes to ability must change so that all citizens, particularly those with disabilities, can be fully included and enabled to perform the functions of daily living. In identifying barriers to full inclusion and strategies to eliminate them, the focus should be on developing social systems and services that accommodate the diverse needs of all community members.

There are many types of disability, including those related to mobility, sight, hearing, psychiatric conditions, intellectual status, learning and communication skills. Some people have more than one disability.

In Canada there are almost 1,900,000 women aged 15 and over and 2,250 girls aged 14 and under who have disabilities.²

The Meaning of Violence

Violence in relationships is any behaviour or pattern of behaviour used by one person to coerce, dominate or isolate the other. It is the use of any form of power that is imposed by one partner over the other to maintain control within the relationship. Violence against women or "woman abuse" generally refers to the threat or use of physical force on a woman's person or property by an intimate partner.

For women with disabilities, the abuse may be perpetrated by an intimate partner or spouse, by a family member or care-giver (e.g., health care service provider, doctor, nurse, institutional and residential staff or attendant). When people depend on others for basic primary care, they may be more vulnerable to abuse.³ Furthermore, abuse incidents are rarely isolated – abuse tends to be an ongoing pattern. For instance, less than 25% of sexual violence is limited to one episode.⁴

Forms of Violence

The following five forms of abuse are typically identified in the literature: physical, emotional, sexual and financial abuse, and neglect.

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is experienced when someone suffers or is at substantial risk of suffering physical harm at the hands of another.⁵ Examples include denial of food or medication, inappropriate personal or medical care, rough handling.⁶

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is experienced when someone suffers or is at substantial risk of suffering mental, emotional or developmental problems resulting from overtly hostile, punitive treatment, or habitual or extreme verbal abuse (threatening, belittling, etc.).⁷

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse includes the experience of having unwanted sexual activities imposed on one, or of having another person attempt to impose such activities on one.

Such activities may include touching or fondling the genitals or sexual harassment.⁸

Financial Abuse

Financial abuse or exploitation entails any act that involves the misuse or abuse of an individual's funds, property or other assets. This includes obtaining property and funds without the person's knowledge or consent or by using undue influence and/or not acting in the person's best interests.⁹

Neglect

Neglect includes failure to supervise or protect, leading to physical harm; sexual abuse; and failure to provide care or medical treatment.¹⁰

Extent of the Problem

National and international studies confirm that women with disabilities are abused at a much higher rate than women without disabilities.

The following statistics illustrate the rates of sexual abuse for women with disabilities:

- Of women with disabilities, it is estimated that 83% will be sexually abused in their lifetime.¹¹
- Of girls with intellectual disabilities, it is estimated that 40% to 70% will be sexually abused before the age of 18.¹²
- Of psychiatric inpatients, 80% have experienced physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime.¹³

Risk Factors

Factors that are especially relevant to the risk that a woman with a disability will be abused include the following:

Sex of the Perpetrator

Most perpetrators of violence against women are men. According to the Preamble to the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, “violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women.”¹⁴

Economic and Social Status

Women with disabilities face challenges to equal participation in society, such as barriers to employment, education, income support, health and social services. Women with disabilities are among the poorest members of our society¹⁵⁻¹⁸ and therefore are placed in situations in which they must rely on others to a greater degree than do those without disabilities. This can lead to a lack of control over their personal affairs, e.g., choice of care-givers or ability to leave an abusive situation. If the abuser is also responsible for providing personal care, there is the additional fear of being left without any assistance.¹⁹ So risk increases in proportion to poverty and dependence on others.

Accessibility and Availability of Support Services

There is broad agreement between disability rights advocates and members of the women’s movement that programs to assist abused women often lack telephone and interpretive services for deaf women, are unable to accommodate women who need assistance with daily self-care or medications, and are

often inaccessible in terms of the architectural features of the buildings in which programs are located.^{20,21} For example, many Canadian shelters cannot yet accommodate women who use wheelchairs. Moreover, for women already experiencing abuse the risk that it will continue is greater if appropriate services are not available or accessible.

Additional Factors

Care-givers may use control, coercion and manipulation to deal with the stress of care-giving. Particularly for women with intellectual disabilities, giving in to this control may become a way of avoiding punishment by the care-giver. Some may feel that they are responsible for the abuse or that they deserve it. Acceptance of being controlled in one relationship can be generalized to all relationships and, through this process, women with disabilities can become “good victims” and easy targets for potential abusers.²² So risk increases in relation to the degree to which the woman adopts such attitudes.

Barriers to Calling the Police²³

Depending on the nature of their disability, some women face challenges both in identifying their experience as abuse and reporting it to the police. For example,

- Women with intellectual disabilities may have difficulty recognizing their experience as abuse.
- A woman with a mobility disability may not be able to call for help if her attacker has placed the telephone out of her reach.

- A deaf woman may be faced with no available TTY (Text Telephone), and other related accessible communication services may take too long to process in a crisis situation.
- A woman with a psychiatric disability may fear that if she calls the police she will not be believed and may be sent to a hospital or institution.

Responding to Abused Women with Disabilities

In the Courts

There are programs in the Canadian criminal justice system to assist abused women. Victim services exist in all provinces and territories.²⁴ For example, in the province of Ontario, the Victim Witness Assistance Program (V/WAP) consists of staff and volunteers who provide support and helpful resources to abused women with disabilities.²⁵ In addition, the courts are finding several ways of improving access for women with disabilities who have been abused:

- preparing resource materials in alternative formats;
- educating and training police, Crown prosecutors and judges to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of women with disabilities, including those who are deaf and hard of hearing, lesbian or Aboriginal, or for whom neither English nor French is their first language;
- providing shorter court proceedings with breaks to accommodate a woman with a disability who may be especially prone to fatigue;

- moving court proceedings to accessible locations in courthouses;
- requesting lawyers and judges to speak slowly and to provide elaboration when questioning a woman who may have difficulty understanding complicated questions because of an intellectual disability.

Legislative Reform

The Canada Evidence Act provides for assistance for people who have communication disabilities and are testifying before criminal courts. It also provides for alternative methods of identifying the accused in court, such as auditory and tactile recognition.²⁶

The Criminal Code has been modified to enable people with physical or intellectual disabilities to testify through the use of videotape. It has also established the offence of sexual exploitation against people with disabilities.²⁷

What You Can Do If You Are Experiencing Violence

Talk about it – It is very helpful to talk about your situation with someone whom you trust – a friend or relative, spiritual leader, doctor, counselor or shelter worker.

Get Legal Advice – Call a legal aid clinic to discuss your options.

Know What to do in an Emergency – Be prepared to act quickly. Make an emergency plan. Plan in advance where you can go to be safe. Contact a shelter ahead of time and ask if it can accommodate you. Work out a code word with shelter staff so that they will be able to readily identify you if you are in a crisis. Prearrange accessible transportation. Make photocopies of

all your identification and important documents, and keep them in a safe place for quick access. Pack an emergency bag, including important documents such as health cards, birth certificates, marriage certificates, immigration/citizenship papers, passports, copies of your lease, mortgage or other deeds, your personal address book, car registration papers, driver's licence and car insurance.

If you are in immediate danger call the police or 911.

What Service Providers and Service Agencies Can Do

When developing services and programs, organizations should consider the following:

- Allocate budgets to make buildings and services accessible;
- Provide resource materials in alternative formats (including audio cassettes, large print, Braille, plain language and computer diskette), attendant care services and American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters;
- Hire women with disabilities;
- Implement strategic planning that integrates solutions pertaining to the accommodation of women with various disabilities;
- Introduce inter-agency exchanges and partnerships with disability organizations and ethnic and immigrant service organizations;
- Provide staff training and public education specifically on violence against women with disabilities;

- Develop abuse protocols that include attention to the issues particular to women with disabilities;
- Evaluate the effectiveness of existing services and programs for women with disabilities, and revision of new intervention services or develop new ones as required.

Suggested Resources

Videos

Safety for You

Ottawa Deaf Centre, 1997

Violence Can Happen To You

Ottawa Deaf Centre, 1997

What Next? What to do About Sexual Assault

Community Living Algoma, 2000

In collaboration with the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada, the NCFV maintains a collection of videos that address child abuse, child sexual abuse, woman abuse and the abuse of older adults. This video collection is available through NFB partner public libraries across the country.

To obtain a complete list of NCFV videos, distributors and libraries please contact the NCFV at: 1-800-267-1291 and request *Preventing Family Violence: A catalogue of Canadian Videos on Family Violence for the General Public and for Professionals Working in the Field*. [cat: H72-21/23-2003].

Publications

Judge's Handbook

Roehrer Institute, and Education Wife Assault 1998

Strengthening the Links, Stopping Violence: A Guide to the Issue of Violence Against Women with Disabilities

Liane Cuistar, DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) 1994

The Sexual Assault Survivor's Handbook for People with Developmental Disabilities and Their Advocates

N. Baladerian, 1991, Council of Canadians with Disabilities

Violence Against Women with Disabilities and Deaf Women and Access to the Justice System Crown Training Manual

Roeher Institute and Education Wife Assault, 1998

We Are Those Women: A Training Manual for Working with Women with Disabilities in Shelters and Sexual Assault Centres

Doris Rajan-Eastcott, 1992 DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) 1994

Women with Disabilities Violence Prevention Resource Guide

Canadian Abilities Foundation, 1997

Organizations

DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN)

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Education Wife Assault

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Phone: (416) 968-3422

TTY: (416) 968-7335

Web site:

www.womanabuseprevention.com

E-mail:

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Canadian Association of Independent Living Centres (CAILC)

1104-170 Laurier Avenue West

Ottawa, Ontario

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Phone: (613) 563-2581

Fax: (613) 563-3861

TTY: (613) 563-4215

Web site: www.cailc.ca

E-mail: cailc@magma.ca

Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD)

926-294 Portage Avenue

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Phone and TTY: 204-947-0303

Web site: <http://www.ccdonline.ca>

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Endnotes

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Également disponible en français sous le titre: *La violence envers les femmes handicapées*

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Cat. H72-22/9-2004E |

ISBN 0-662-29971-X