

Domestic violence and women with disabilities

Domestic violence means violence that occurs in your home. Around one quarter of married women and women in de facto relationships in Australia experience domestic violence at some stage. Compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and for more extended periods of time.

Types of violence

The different types of domestic violence experienced by women with disabilities can include:

- Hitting, punching, choking, kicking, pushing, burning with lit cigarettes.
- Threats, such as threatening physical harm or threatening to have the woman institutionalised.
- Threats against the woman's children, pets or guide dog.
- Verbal abuse such as criticisms, putdowns and insults.
- Taking control of the woman's disability aids against her wishes, such as moving her wheelchair around.
- Damaging or threatening to damage belongings, including disability aids.
- Neglect, such as refusing to wash or feed the woman or to hand over medications.
- Performing care in cruel ways, such as washing her in cold water.
- Refusing to offer help until the woman consents to sex.
- Unwanted sexual advances, ranging from unwanted touching to rape.
- Withholding information.
- Making decisions on the woman's behalf without her consent.
- Taking control of the woman's finances without her consent, including withholding money or not allowing her to shop for herself.
- Isolating the woman from family, friends and services.

The abusers

According to Western Australian research, the abusers are:

- Male spouse or partner - 43 per cent
- Parent - 15 per cent
- Female spouse or partner - 11 per cent
- Other relative - 8 per cent
- Child - 7 per cent
- Another person such as a neighbour - 6 per cent
- Carer - 4 per cent
- Work colleague - 2 per cent
- Healthcare professional - 2 per cent
- House or flat mate - 1 per cent
- Clergy - 1 per cent.

Women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence

Compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and for more extended periods of time. Some of the many reasons for this include:

- **Social myths** - people with disabilities are often dismissed as passive, helpless, child-like, non-sexual and burdensome. These prejudices tend to make people with disabilities less visible to society, and suggest that abuse, especially sexual abuse, is unlikely.
- **Learned helplessness** - people with disabilities, particularly people with cognitive disabilities or those who have been living in institutions for a long time, are encouraged to be compliant and cooperative. This life history can make it harder for a woman to defend herself against abuse.
- **Lack of sex education** - there is a tendency to deny sex education to people with intellectual disabilities. If a woman with no knowledge of sex is sexually abused, it is harder for her to seek help because she may not understand exactly what is happening to her.
- **Dependence** - the woman may be dependent on her abuser for care because her disability limits her economic and environmental independence.
- **Misdiagnosis** - authorities may misinterpret a cry for help; for example, a woman's behaviour might be diagnosed as anxiety rather than signs of abuse. In other situations, workers may not be aware that domestic violence also includes financial or emotional abuse, or may not be sensitive to the signs.
- **The abuser takes control** - if the woman seeks help, follow-up may be difficult because the abuser isolates her and prevents her from using the phone or leaving the house.

Reasons for not seeking help from authorities

One US study found that women with disabilities tend not to report the abuse themselves. Some of the many reasons why women with disabilities may not seek help from authorities and support agencies include:

- Shame.
- Belief that she somehow deserves to be abused.
- Belief that she is being abused because she is disabled.
- Not knowing that she has any rights or that there are laws to protect her.
- Not realising that the treatment she receives is abusive, because she has been treated this way her whole life.
- Staying where she is and enduring the abuse may seem like a slightly better option than poverty, homelessness or institutionalisation.
- Belief that the police and the courts don't take domestic violence as seriously as other kinds of violence.
- Prior bad experiences with authorities - for example, a woman with a psychiatric illness may have had an upsetting experience with police in the past, which is why she won't consider contacting them for help.
- Isolation - for example, the abuser may not allow her to use the phone or leave the house.
- Lack of access to information, because the abuser chooses to withhold information from her.
- Fear of negative outcomes.

Fear can stop women from seeking help

Common fears include:

- Fear that no one will believe her.
- Fear that no one will be able to help her.
- Fear of being punished by the abuser for reporting the violence.
- Fear of being shamed, punished or shunned by her family, friends and community.
- Fear of loss - for example, she may be afraid of losing her home or having her children taken away from her.
- Fear of being institutionalised.
- Fear of having no one to help her if she leaves the relationship.

Barriers to women with disabilities getting help

Some of the reasons why women with disabilities may not get help include:

- Disability policies tend to rely on family members taking care of the person, which is disastrous if the carer is also the abuser.

- Since the abuser is often the caregiver, the woman is denied information and access to help services.
- The wide range of disabilities means there is no distinct 'group', so there is no 'one size fits all' policy to adopt nor any easy way to access all of the women who need help.
- Domestic violence workers may not be educated about the issues facing women with disabilities, and disability workers may not be educated about domestic violence.
- The various agencies that help people with disabilities aren't cross-referenced as thoroughly as they could be, which creates service gaps. For example, a woman might be referred back and forth between two agencies, such as sexual assault services and disability services, without receiving help from either because she falls outside the guidelines of both agencies.
- Studies and statistics on women with disabilities and domestic violence are few and far between, so agencies may not be aware of service gaps.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Police Tel. 000
- Ambulance Tel. 000
- The Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service of Victoria (24 hour) Tel. 1800 015 188
- Domestic Violence Outreach Workers - call The Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service for the telephone number of your local outreach worker
- Domestic Violence Crisis Centre (national number) Tel. 1800 633 937
- Women With Disabilities Australia Tel. (03) 6244 8288 (Tasmania)
- National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service (Australia) Tel. 1800 737 732 - free telephone counselling hotline (24 hours, 7 days)
- 1800RESPECT - for real-time online counselling.

Things to remember

- Compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and for more extended periods of time.
- The male spouse or partner is the abuser in 43 per cent of cases according to one Western Australian study.
- There are many barriers that prevent women with disabilities from seeking help, including reliance on the abuser, fear and service gaps in disability and women's agencies.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria - DVRCV

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