

Women with Disabilities

Physical and Sexual Assault

Over one million women in Canada have a disability. Over two-thirds of these women—about 670,000—have been physically or sexually assaulted before they reach puberty. This figure is twice as high as it is for women without disabilities. One out of three disabled women in Canada—about 330,000—experience physical and sexual assault as adults. This compares to about one out of four women without disabilities.

These figures represent a crisis. For most women and girls with disabilities, violence is a way of life. This way of life is caused by society's ignorance. Society pretends these women do not exist. Poverty, isolation and dependence on caregivers make them far more vulnerable to violence.

I know my husband used my disability as a reason to abuse me. I was doubly isolated—hearing impaired and living in a lonely, abusive marriage. I could not see my way out.

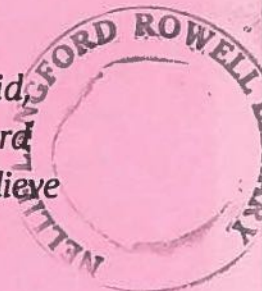
Where can a woman go for help?

Society isolates disabled women, making it almost impossible to escape.

Although they need a supportive and safe environment more than anybody, lack of accessible transportation and communication effectively shuts them out. The vast majority of women's shelters and rape crisis centres are inaccessible. Staff and volunteers know little or nothing of disabilities. If a disabled woman does manage to reach a centre or shelter, she may be turned away and she may suffer further abuse.

When a disabled woman seeks justice through the courts, lawyers and judges may not be sympathetic and many may not even believe her testimony.

I confronted the doctor who sexually assaulted me. He said, "In court, it would be your word against mine. Who would believe you over me?"



Even if the courts accept her testimony, she will rarely find retribution. In fact, it may work against her. Many judges consider a disabled woman less capable of parenting than her abusive husband, and they may give the husband full custody. If a disabled woman reports assault by a caregiver, she may lose essential services. If she



reports assault by a spouse, she may lose financial support or stability.

Who are the most at risk?

The women and girls who suffer the most severe and frequent assaults are:

- women with multiple disabilities
- women with developmental disabilities
- women with communication disabilities, and
- women who are disabled at birth or early childhood.

The more physicians and caregivers a woman depends on, the more likely she is to be assaulted and abused.

I was manipulated, battered, and physically and emotionally pushed around in two hospitals. Within two months, they physically pushed me into an acute arthritic flare-up. I went from using a cane to using a wheelchair.

A girl with a disability is twice as likely to suffer sexual and physical assault as a girl without a disability. The most dangerous place for her to be is in her own home.

He raped me over and over again from the time I was four until I was eleven. Unlike my other

sisters, I couldn't run away from him. I was sexually abused because I was mobility impaired.

If a disabled girl is sent to foster homes or institutions, she still faces a high risk of sexual and physical assault.

I ended up in foster homes when I was about six. This fellow grabbed me by the ear because I was fighting with some girl outside. He dragged me inside the house. Tore my clothes. Tied my wrists to the bedposts, whipped me with his belt, and then he raped me. I was only six or seven.

Who are the assailants?

The assailant is seldom a stranger. The most likely assailant is a disabled girl's mother or father. The next most likely assailants are caregivers both female and male, doctors, nurses, institutional and residential school staff. Other likely assailants are husbands, boyfriends, ex-boyfriends, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers.

I was abused by my father, my stepfather, my mother's boyfriend, my uncle, some teenagers—well, that was rape so I won't count that—oh, and two foster fathers. Some I don't even remember.



Mom remembered one I hadn't remembered. She took in this lady and this lady's boyfriend did something. She kicked him out. The one time she did something, and I forgot about it.

Parental abuse which is called "discipline" is still legal in North America. It can cause disability and can aggravate an existing disability.

Although my hearing impairment likely occurred when I was six weeks old, I have many memories of being shaken and beaten when I was very little. I believe my hearing could have worsened due to long-term abuse. When I have those bodily memories, I will actually go into a convulsion. It was like a spike had been driven through me, and split my brain in two. I believe the abuse in my infancy is a major cause of many of my illnesses.

Why are women with disabilities at such high risk?

Society's attitudes towards women and disability are the source of the problem. Pornography, a multi-billion dollar industry in North America, graphically illustrates the level of violence in our society. Its message is clear: women are objects of aggression

and control. When women have disabilities, they are even easier targets of rape and physical assault.

In 1989, Jillian Ridington studied 3000 men's magazines and was shocked with what she saw. All gave the message that women really wanted to be raped, that No really means Yes. Many magazines narrated coercive sex scenes involving disabled women. Each issue of **Hustler** carried cartoons and jokes about the disabling and dismemberment of women. **Hustler's** publisher recommended that men rape young girls with developmental disabilities "because they won't be able to tell what happened."

It somehow seems more okay to abuse a disabled child, or someone who really doesn't know what's going on, or someone who doesn't move quickly, talk clearly, or see or hear as well as others. When I said No my father ignored me. I said No many times, I really did. I was always saying No, but it didn't seem to matter. No meant Yes.

What action are women with disabilities taking?

They are taking self-defense courses to learn how to protect themselves. Members of the DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) are working together to help make services accessible. These



services include women's shelters, rape crisis centres and feminist counselling. Women with disabilities are speaking about violence at conferences, seminars, and events such as "Take Back the Night" marches. The voices of women with disabilities are strong and will no longer be silenced.

What can be done to stop the violence?

You are helping to stop the violence merely by reading this fact sheet. Listen to women with disabilities. Believe them when they share their stories. Call or write your local chapter of DAWN for more information.

Sources

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Resources

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