

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

by: DisAbled Women's Network Toronto

Women with disabilities are speaking out against violence and making it an important agenda item. But discussion - and action - must be increased if we are to attack the roots of violence against disabled women. This will help disabled women free themselves from violent situations.

A 1987 survey of women with disabilities, carried out by DAWN Toronto, and funded by the Ministry of Community and Social Services, discovered:

- 67% of those surveyed had been physically or sexually assaulted as children, compared with 44% of non-disabled women;

- Almost half of disabled women surveyed reported that they were sexually abused as children, compared with 34% of non-disabled women;
- 33% of disabled women reported they were assaulted during their adult years, mostly by husbands. 22% of non-disabled women reported similar abuse; and
- 31% of disabled women reported being sexually assaulted as adults compared with 23% of non-disabled women.

Where do these assaults occur and who is responsible?

The DAWN study found that the most dangerous place for a disabled girl or woman was her own home.

The most likely abusers? Her own mother and/or father.

Female caregivers were the next most likely assailants.

Many disabled women experience assault at the hands of teachers, attendants, older brothers and others.

It might be speculated that disabled women and girls are perceived as ideal targets because their disabilities may mean they are unable to flee, or communicate easily. The very fact that they are female, smaller, and socialized to be passive may, again, increase the risk of abuse. A study by the Seattle Rape Relief Development Disabilities Project in 1984 found that 90% of the girls and women referred to them had been exploited by relatives or individuals they knew.

How many cases are reported?

Despite the high rate of assault and sexual assault of

women and girls with disabilities, only 20% of all adult rape cases are reported to social service agencies or the police. This is not surprising when one considers the barriers - such as lack of credibility - disabled women face in court. Women with psychiatric and developmental disabilities, as well as women who have difficulty communicating and use alternative devices such as bliss boards, are almost never believed.

This lack of credibility is further complicated by public perception. Some people believe that a disabled woman should be "grateful" for any attention she gets, since she probably would not have sex any other way. Others refuse to believe a disabled woman could be sexually assaulted at all. Well-meaning professionals sometimes demonstrate these attitudes when they encourage women with

disabilities to stay in abusive relationships, suggesting they should not expect any better.

What are the consequences of assault for women with disabilities?

An assault of a disabled woman can trigger severe physical reactions. A woman with cerebral palsy may develop even more unclear speech, a staggering gait or more spasms than is normal for her; a woman with diabetes may go into insulin shock; a woman with epilepsy may have a seizure. It may also be more difficult for the woman to recover from the assault because of her dependency on others and the isolation created by the disability.

Disabled survivors of assault often have a difficult

time escaping from their assailants. They are often financially dependant on these individuals, and the physical means of fleeing assault, such as accessible transportation, are often unavailable on short notice or after midnight.

Even if a disabled woman does escape, very few women's shelters are accessible. Facilities without ramps and elevators, TDD's or attendant care are not an option for women with disabilities. A women with quadriplegia, in such an instance, could expect to find herself referred to a hospital or institution.

In addition, disabled women with children who flee abusive situations run the risk of losing custody of their children because authorities may question their ability to care for them alone.

What can we do?

Assertiveness and self-defence courses have proven to be helpful for women with disabilities. While there is no guarantee that women who take these courses will not be attacked, women who take such courses have been found to recover more quickly from assault. Disabled women have initiated specialized self-defence courses in at least two provinces in Canada.

As a society, we all have the responsibility to respond to the issue of violence whenever we can. If you would like more information about the DisAbled Women's Network Toronto, please call us at (416) 750-3296 or write to us at: 160 the Esplanade, Suite 601, Toronto, Ontario, M5A 3T2.

Resource List

Courage Above All - Sexual Assault Against Women with Disabilities, DAWN Toronto, 160 The Esplanade, #601, Toronto, Ontario, M5A 3T2 (October 1991)

Meeting Our Needs - An Access Manual for Transition Houses, DAWN Canada, 658 Danforth Avenue, Suite 203, Toronto, Ontario, M4J 1L1 (June 1990)

Responding to the Abuse of People with Disabilities, Advocacy Resource Centre for the Handicapped, 40 Orchard View Blvd., Suite 255, Toronto, Ontario, M4R 1B9