



D A W N

Dis·abled Women's Network

VIOLENT ACTS AGAINST DISABLED WOMEN

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Funded through a grant by the Ministry of Community
and Social Services, the Province of Ontario.

This report documents the final results of a survey done in the fall of 1986 to determine the incidence of violent assault against disabled women. At the D.A.W.N. Canada organizing meeting in Ottawa, June, 1985, violence was prioritized as a problem for disabled women across the country. D.A.W.N. Toronto members subsequently pointed to a high level of violence in their lives and the need for prevention, counselling and other programs. I have been working in this field over the last few years, leading workshops and seminars on violence against disabled women, and have over and over again, heard disabled women speak eloquently of battering, sexual abuse, incest and other forms of assault. It seemed to pervade their lives, yet, after much looking, I found that there was virtually no information available, neither scholarly, professional or popular.

The efforts of disabled women to change this violence have been hampered both by lack of material resources (shelters, phonelines, funding, etc.), but by the lack of the most basic of information. In the literature on violence, disabled women are virtually invisible women. To remedy this situation and promote greater awareness of the problem, the DisAbled Women's Network Toronto approached the

Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services and obtained a grant of \$5,000 to fund this paper and a workshop on violence at our first provincial conference in November of 1986. (Actually, two workshops were held due to the high demand).

To our knowledge, this is the first and only detailed statistical information on the incidence of violent assault against disabled women in North America. We would welcome information about any other studies on the subject.

The silence on violence against disabled women is startling given the virtual flood of books, monographs, surveys and studies on violence against women which has come from not just feminists, but academics, the medical profession, criminology and government (to name a few). Even the professionals most intimately involved in the lives of disabled women (medicine, rehabilitation, physiotherapy, charity, occupational therapy, nursing, etc.) have yet to seriously address the battering, rape, incest, medical assault and child abuse which cast such a long and devastating shadow over the lives of disabled women.

We hope that this will be just the first of other projects. We would encourage others to do more research and different kinds of research

so that those with the capacity to fund prevention programs and services will be aware of the need; so that women's services (shelters, phone lines, etc.) will become accessible to disabled women; so that disabled women will be able to live in the safety and security currently denied to us.

The questionnaire was divided into eight sections: background information, child physical abuse, child sexual abuse, adult physical abuse, adult sexual abuse, medical assault, and a section for comments. We have summarized the results while placing a selection of comments by participants under each subject area.

The survey was included in the conference kits of delegates to two conferences in November 1986. Delegates at the D.A.W.N. provincial conference represent the disabled sample. Non-disabled women at the Side by Side Women's Sexuality Conference are presented as a control group. Both groups are, therefore, self selected as not all delegates responded to the questionnaire. Instructions were given verbally at plenaries during both conference, goals and methodology explained, and all delegates, whether they were assault victims or not, encouraged to complete the lengthy form.

BACKGROUND

There were 30 disabled participants and 32 non-disabled participants. The ages of the disabled women ranged from 20 to 61 years; the non-disabled, from 21 to 63 years. The average age of the disabled women was 31 years; the non-disabled, 32. Both populations, therefore, were similar in age.

Types of Disability

	No.	Percentage
Hearing impaired or deaf	13	43
Mobility impaired	8	27
Invisible disabilities	1	3
Cross disabilities (<u>ie.</u> more than 1 disability)	8	27

Eight of the participants had more than one disability. For example, several were mobility impaired and hearing impaired or deaf. Some had mobility impairments and invisible disabilities (eg. Parkinson's or epilepsy). Several were visually impaired or blind and mobility impaired.

The format of this survey presented accessibility problems to blind and visually impaired women, as well as others with print handicaps (eg. learning disabilities). Although it was available on audio tape, the response from visually impaired and blind women was low. A survey of this population would require a labour intensive interview by trained staff, something beyond the scope and resources of

this project, but anecdotal information suggests that such a study is both necessary and timely.

Living Situation

	Disabled		Non-disabled	
	No.	%	No.	%
City	25	83	30	94
Town	2	7	2	6
Rural	3	10	-	-
Alone	10	33	11	34
With parents	7	23	4	13
With spouse/lover	5	17	10	31
With friend/roommate	3	10	4	13
With children	2	7	1	3
Other	-	-	1	3
In house	13	43	21	66
In apartment	11	37	10	31
In co-op housing with adapted units for disabled	4	14	-	-

Disabled women were more likely to live in rural areas than non-disabled, more likely to be living with their parents, less likely to be living in a house and more likely to be in co-op housing, but, in other ways, the two populations

have similar living situations.

Onset of Disability

47 per cent (14) were disabled from birth.

30 per cent (9) were disabled as children.

23 per cent (7) were disabled as adults.

Financial Status

All of the non-disabled women reported that they had control over their own finances. 20 percent of the disabled women reported that someone else (parents, spouse, government, etc.) controlled their money. Without access to financial resources, these six women are placed in a dependency relationship. Without money, women may find themselves unable to leave violent situations because they cannot even take wheelchair accessible transportation or a cab, not to mention pay for rent groceries, attendant care, child care, etc.

Gross Annual Income

	Disabled		Non-disabled	
	No.	%	No.	%
-\$5,000	10	33	2	6
\$5,001 - \$7,000	2	7	2	6
\$7,001 - \$11,000	5	17	3	9
\$11,001 - \$18,000	2	7	7	22
+\$18,000	5	17	17	53
No source of income	5	17	1	3

(One non-disabled woman failed to answer this question.)

74 percent of the disabled women reported gross annual incomes of under \$11,000 a year, at or under the poverty line. Only 24 percent of the non-disabled women reported such low incomes while 53 percent of the non-disabled women had incomes of over \$18,000 (compared to 17 percent of the disabled women).

Poverty is an overwhelming reality for most disabled women and its impact on our lives cannot be over-estimated. Any discussion of violence, any prevention program, any service or funding effort must recognize that disabled women are among the poorest of the poor. This had dramatic impact on us as individuals and as a group for any collective effort on the part of disabled female victims of violence or disabled women's groups cannot rely on more than the most token of financial contributions by disabled women ourselves. Personal initiative, self esteem, group solidarity, independence and hope wilt in the face of grinding poverty.

Marital Status

As the following chart shows, disabled women are much less likely to be married or in a long term relationship. Disabled women in the sample were much more likely to be divorced.

	Disabled		Non-disabled	
	No.	%	No.	%
Married/long term relationship	7	23	14	44
Single	15	50	14	44
Divorced	7	23	2	6
Separated	-	-	2	6
Widowed	1	3	-	-
Other	-	-	1	3

Many disabled women (in conversations with the writer) feel that their husbands left them when the women became disabled because the men could not cope with the changes in roles, the role reversal. The men resented the loss of wifely services and nurturing. Other women stated that when their disabilities became worse, their spouses left for similar reasons.

Meanwhile, as the workshop on body image reveals (in the D.A.W.N. Ontario Conference report attached) many disabled women experience great difficulty in finding potential partners and remain unmarried, or perhaps enter less than happy relationships, for such reasons.

PART ONEPHYSICAL ABUSE OF DISABLED GIRLS

"I've been physically and verbally abused at school and emotionally and verbally abused at home and relative's. I wish very much for the Government to train and fund counsellors to counsel parents and family of the disabled to help them cope with their differences and problems. And also to provide an ongoing program for elementary and grade school teachers (and perhaps disabled persons) ...awareness programs...it would help a lot to make people aware we are all 'Disabled' -- that there is no such thing as 'Normal'. It would help cut down the abuse..."

DISABLED PARTICIPANT

"I was abused as a child usually because I wouldn't stay in one place for long or because the assistant believed that I was not listening...[my assailant] got rid of his frustrations by hitting, screaming or yelling at me. It wasn't long before they realized I had a hearing disability. The beating stopped."

DISABLED PARTICIPANT

67 per cent of the disabled women reported that they'd been physically abused or battered as children

in contrast to the 66 percent of non-disabled women who reported that they had NOT been abused. Clearly, disabled girls are at high risk for child physical abuse.

The most dangerous place for a disabled girl to be, our figures indicate, is her own home and her most common assailant her own mother or/and father. Female caregivers were the next most likely assailants. Many disabled women reported that adults in numerous roles (teachers, attendants, older brothers, etc.) had beaten them. This pattern is not duplicated among the non-disabled women. Apparently, as some disabled women reported, it was as if an Open Season for brutality had been declared, allowing the disabled girl to be the target of violence from a great variety of adults (and older boys) around her. It might be speculated that the victim was perceived as an ideal target both because of her disability (with weakness, inability to flee, inability to communicate or tell, etc.) and her femaleness (smaller stature, socialized passivity, etc.). The high incidence of violence reported in every category of this report would support such a conclusion.

Childhood physical abuse

	Disabled		Non-disabled	
	No.	%	No.	%
Abused	20	67	11	34
Not abused	10	33	21	66
Frequency	No.		No.	
Infrequent	11		8	
Frequent	2		1	
Very Frequent	7		1	
Duration				
Short period	8		2	
Several years	2		2	
Long period	10		7	

Sixty five percent of the disabled women (13) reported that they were disabled at the time of the abuse; 10 percent (2) indicated that they became disabled as the result of abuse; and 35 percent were not disabled at the time of the abuse. The remaining charts in this section list only those who were disabled at the time of the abuse or became disabled as the result of abuse.

Assailant

	Disabled	Nondisabled
Mother	8	7
Father	6	6
Female Caregiver	5	-
Peers	2	-

Older brother	2	1
Male caregiver	2	-
Foster father	1	-
Male acquaintance	1	-
Male stranger	1	-
Older sister	1	-
Step-father, mother's boyfriend	1	-
Other	1	1

Please note that eight of those disabled at the time of the abuse or as a result of the abuse were assaulted at different times by a great variety of people (eg. mother, older brother, male caregiver, female caregiver and peers at school).

In six cases assault against a disabled girl was reported (nine unreported) while all eleven cases of battering of a non-disabled child were not reported. Possibly the high level of reporting reflects the greater involvement of social service agencies and professionals in the family life of the disabled child.

The major reason given for the cessation of abuse by disabled girls was "I moved away" (eg. was removed from a particular institution or was put in foster home). Non-disabled girls reported that the major reason their battering ceased was that either they grew too old

or the assailant moved away.

PART TWO

SEXUAL ABUSE OF DISABLED GIRLS

"I was raped over and over again from the time I was four till I was eleven. Unlike the other kids, I couldn't run away from him. So I was sexually abused because I was disabled [mobility impaired]. But I got more disabled because of what he did to me. He tied me up and hung me from things. It hurt my joints." DISABLED

PARTICIPANT

"I find it very sad to hear that one of my friends has been sexually assaulted...it was hard for her to get over it." DISABLED PARTICIPANT [Hearing Impaired]

Almost half of the disabled women reported being sexually abused as children as compared to about a third of the non-disabled control group. In almost all cases the assailant was known to the victim. Seven of the attackers were members of the victim's only family, indicating that the incidence of incest among disabled women is very high. Currently, D.A.W.N. is unaware of an incest survivors program that is accessible to disabled women.

The father is usually reported as the assailant in incestuous assault. Although our sample is not large enough to state conclusions with any assurance,

researchers might be interested in exploring the incidence of brother-sister incidence further.

Sexual abuse of disabled girls

	Disabled		Non-disabled	
	No.	%	No.	%
Abused	14	47	11	34
Not abused	15	50	21	66

(Note: 1 disabled women did not answer this question).

8 women were disabled at the time of the abuse; 3 became disabled or were further disabled as the result of the sexual abuse; 4 were not disabled at the time of the abuse; and 1 woman was unsure about the status of her disability at the time of the assault.

Incestuous Assailants

	Disabled No.	Non-disabled No.
Older brother	3	1
Father	1	2
Stepfather/mother's boyfriend	1	1
Mother	1	-
Other female relative	1	-
Grandfather	-	1
Older cousin	-	1

Sexual Assailants (Extrafamilial)

	Disabled No.	Non-disabled No.
Male family friend	3	1
Older boys/male peers	2	1
Male stranger	2	3 *N.B. exposure only
Male caregiver	2	-
Male acquaintance	1	1

Type of Assault

	Disabled No.	Non-disabled No.
Penetration	3	3
Exposure	3	4
General sexual molestation	6	8
Physical violence	2	-

Frequency

Infrequent	7	8
Frequent	1	1
Very frequent	2	2

Duration

Short period	5	6
Several years	2	3
Long period	3	2

3 out of 11 cases among the disabled women were reported as were 3 out of 8 among the non-disabled women. The most common reason for cessation of childhood sexual abuse among disabled women was intervention by an adult. The most common reason among non-disabled women was "I moved away".

PART THREE

PHYSICAL ABUSE OF DISABLED WOMEN

	Disabled		Non-disabled	
	No.	%	No.	%
Abused	10	33	7	22
Not abused	19	63	25	78

(Note: 1 disabled woman did not respond to this question).

9 women were disabled at the time of the abuse; 3 women became disabled or further disabled as the result of abuse; and 1 woman was unsure of the status of her disability at the time of the assault. The following information represents only those women (under "Disabled") who were disabled at the time of the assault or who became disabled or further disabled as the result of assault.

Physical abuse of disabled women

	Disabled No.	Non-disabled No.
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Frequency		
Infrequent	4	6
Frequent	3	1
Very frequent	2	-
Duration		
Short period of time	-	6
Several years	2	-
Long period of time	5	1
No answer	1	-
Assailant		
Spouse/lover	5	5
Boyfriend	3	1
Male acquaintance	2	-
Step-father	1	-
Mother	1	1
Female acquaintance	1	-
Female stranger	1	1
Casual date	-	1
Father	-	1

In 4 out of 6 cases among the disabled women, the assault was reported; in 3 out of 8 cases among the non-disabled women, the assault was reported. Among

both groups of women, the major reason for the assault stopping was "I moved away".

"I was physically, emotionally and verbally abused in my thirteen year marriage. I cannot say that it was totally because I am disabled. Certainly family of origin and upbringing had a direct effect. (I was not hearing impaired when growing up). I grew up in a troubled home and married into a troubled alcoholic marriage. I do believe, however, that the disability gave my husband reason to oppress me and feel better than me. It also kept me in an abusive marriage much longer because I could not see my way out. I was doubly isolated -- hearing impaired and living in a lonely, abusive marriage."

DISABLED PARTICIPANT

"When I was a teenager marriage was for life. My husband beat me severely on several occasions (Great Misconceptions). When I became an amputee, it got worse. He put a hole in my eardrum, fractured my jaw, etc. ...I now feel -- we Women -- should let our voices be heard in protest to all abuse anyone forces on us. Able or Disabled, these are our bodies and we should stick to our guns and not let anyone abuse us."

DISABLED PARTICIPANT

PART FOURSEXUAL ASSAULT OF DISABLED WOMEN

"I had a teacher who was always making sexual comments at me. Verbal abuse. I took action and wrote him a personal letter and asked him to stop it or I would take him to court." DISABLED PARTICIPANT

"I have met many disabled women who tell me that they were raped. This type of survey will help to show these awful problems and the fact that we need to do something." DISABLED PARTICIPANT

Disabled women are often thought of as asexual and, therefore, unlikely to be sexually assaulted or raped. The following statistics reveal that this is untrue. Even very severely disabled women in this survey indicated that they had been sexually assaulted.

Sexual assault of disabled women

	Disabled		Non-disabled	
	No.	%	No.	%
Assaulted	7	23	10	31
Not assaulted	18	60	22	69

5 disabled women did not answer this question which may indicate a high level of discomfort with the question or perhaps fatigue (since this is near the end of the questionnaire).

Sexual assault of disabled women

	Disabled No.	Non-disabled No.
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Frequency		
Once	1	4
Several times	5	6
+ 4 times	2	1
Assailant		
Spouse	3	4
Boyfriend	2	3
Male employer	1	-
Male stranger	1	-
Male acquaintance	1	8
Brother-in-law	1	-
Casual date	1	4
Female resident of institution	1	-
Father	-	1
Type of assault		
Exposure only	3	1
Penetration	3	6
General sexual molestation	6	9
Physical violence	3	1

Both disabled and non-disabled women gave the major reason for the cessation of the sexual assault(s) as "I left".

PART FIVE

MEDICAL ASSAULT OF DISABLED WOMEN

19 or 63 percent of the disabled women indicated that they had been medically assaulted while 18 or 56 percent of the non-disabled women indicated that they had also been medically assaulted.

17 of the disabled and 18 of the non-disabled had been given medication without informed consent. 4 of the disabled and 3 of the non-disabled women had been sexually assaulted during medical examination. 3 of the disabled and 3 of the non-disabled women had been operated on without informed consent. The doctor in an hospital was the most likely assailant of disabled women. Non-disabled women indicated that the family doctor and hospital doctor were the equally likely to assault them. Both groups of women stated that the major reason the assault stopped was that they "moved away or left" (eg. changed doctors or hospitals).

"...I was never told why certain tests are performed and there is a tendency to ridicule me for asking questions. Often I'm asked to undress even if they

only have to exam my arm." DISABLED PARTICIPANT

"I confronted the doctor [who sexually assaulted me] who did not deny it, but said, 'In court it would be your word against mine and who'd believe you over me!'" NON-DISABLED PARTICIPANT

CONCLUSIONS

Over two thirds of the disabled women reported that they'd been battered as children. Almost half of the disabled women had been sexually abused as children. A third had been battered as adults. Almost one quarter had been sexually assaulted during adulthood. Almost two thirds had been medically assaulted. Not only is the incidence of violence against disabled women extremely high, but disabled women, our figures indicate, are more likely to be assaulted or abused than non-disabled women. The only exception to this is in the area of adult sexual assault where about 10 per cent more non-disabled women are assaulted.

The vast majority of disabled women in this study experienced some form of assault in their lives. Some unfortunate women were battered and sexually abused as children, battered and sexually

abused as adults, and assaulted by a doctor or other medical professional.

Since there are over a million disabled women in Canada, the magnitude of the problem is enormous and the implications far reaching. Most services for the victims of violence are not accessible to disabled women. Traditional charities have paid little attention to the problem (and less funding). Governments are just becoming aware of the issues of disabled women or even that we have concerns of our own, not to speak of violence. Feminists have not thought of disabled women as minority women as they think of Native women, black women or immigrant women and often our demands to be heard are seen as unreasonable or frightening. The "helper professions" are very likely to be the "caregivers" who assault us. Disabled women remain poor, often isolated, usually the victims of violence.

This study does not represent the latest in scientific sampling techniques and sociological brilliance. It is a first step or a sign post, pointing at a problem and a challenge. Disabled consumer groups, particularly those representing women such as D.A.W.N., are in the forefront in this area. We hope others join us in our struggle

to be free from the shadow of fear, to be safe
and confident of our right to bodily integrity
no matter what our disability, and to live as free and
equal women in the Ontario of the future.