



DisAbled Women's Network of Canada

Réseau d'action des femmes
handicapées Canada

Parliamentary Brief

Women with Disabilities and Interpersonal Violence

Prepared for the Standing Committee on the Status of Women for
their Study on Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence in Canada

by
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ABOUT THE DISABLED WOMEN'S NETWORK (DAWN) CANADA

The DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada is a feminist cross-disability human rights organization that works to address systems of oppression. We focus on addressing issues of disability and through our four pillars of research, education, policy and advocacy. We amplify the voices of women across the gender spectrum through an intersectional lens.

DAWN's mandate to end the poverty, isolation, discrimination and violence experienced by Canadian women with disabilities and Deaf women and promote the advancement and inclusion of women and girls with disabilities and Deaf women by creating change at a systemic level.

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I- Women with disabilities and interpersonal violence – inclusive language, inclusive policies, a beginning for the National Action Plan

Statistics Canada indicate that 24% of women report having a disability. The rate is above 30% for Black and Indigenous women and girls because systemic discrimination, including racism increases the risk of disability.

Women with a disability most often reported the perpetrator was a friend, acquaintance, or neighbour (44%) and 30% of incidents of victimization occurred in their home. In addition to high overall rates of abuse for women with disabilities, women with disabilities were more likely to report being the victim of multiple and separate incidents of violence in the last 12 months (36% of women with disabilities). Women with disabilities are 2x as likely as women without disabilities to have been sexually assaulted in the last year.

With respect to spousal abuse, 39% of women with disabilities have experienced spousal violence, 46% have been physically injured because of this violence, and 38 % have feared for their lives. Women with disabilities living in marital or common law unions are reported as more likely to experience violence by 40%¹, while rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) are higher among women who report an activity limitation than those without². Women with cognitive disabilities are more likely to be the victim of violence from a common-law partner, or current or former spouse (43%).

Where violence and abuse are concerned, and with respect to disability, there are interrelated elements at play including violence as both the cause of disability and disability as a factor increasing the risk of victimization. Recent data affirms what DAWN Canada has been saying for decades, the equally disturbing reality that women are becoming disabled as a result of domestic violence.

It has been estimated that each year, as many as 276, 000 women in Canada will experience a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) as a result of intimate partner violence³. 71% of women with disabilities report contacting or using formal support services due to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)⁴. Women with disabilities face more barriers in leaving abusive situations as both disability-related services and services for victims of abuse are often not able to respond to their needs. Gender-based violence remains a critical issue for women and girls with disabilities. As the research above highlights, the issue is pressing and reflects the need for us to collectively address the realities of gender-based violence over the life course for women and girls with disabilities.

¹ Brownridge, D. A. (2006). Partner violence against women with disabilities: Prevalence, risk, and explanations. *Violence against women*, 12(9), 805-822.

² Cohen, M. M., Forte, T., Du Mont, J., Hyman, I., & Romans, S. (2005). Intimate partner violence among Canadian women with activity limitations. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 59(10), 834-839.

³ P van Donkelaar (2015) Traumatic Brain Injury: The unseen impact of domestic violence. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/traumatic-brain-injury-the-unseen-impact-of-domestic-violence-92730>

⁴ Pinto, P. C. (2015). Women, disability, and the right to health. *Women's Health 2e: Intersections of Policy, Research, and Practice*, 137.

II- Lack of Support

Women and girls with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by gender-based violence and there are serious structural and attitudinal barriers to increasing supports and services. A 2018 brief by DAWN Canada submitted to FEWO for their study of shelters and transition houses in Canada, identified serious barriers for women with disabilities in accessing shelters, note the distinction in language and that we are not focused on accessibility. DAWN Canada and our partners at Women Shelters Canada and the vast majority of shelters themselves recognize there are gaps in services. And yes this was and continues to be compounded by COVID-19 because women with disabilities are now faced with policies that bring them into greater contact with the sites and people associated with their disproportionately higher rates of abuse. Shelters were already over-whelmed and under-resourced before the pandemic.

Access to supports and services can be particularly difficult for certain women and girls with disabilities. One study exploring the experiences of violence among Muslim immigrant women and girls in Canada noted that one woman with a disability was ignored by both immigrant-focused and disability-focuses services as neither saw her as the type of client they were mandated to support.⁵ Additionally, women with disabilities are 5x more likely to report unsatisfactory services from police, than among women without disabilities.⁶

What all of this information points to and now informs the National Action Plan and next steps is that systemic discrimination, including ableism, sexism and racism pervades our research, our policies, our programs and our responses. The reflex to focus on the current resources is strong but it will not result in the kind of systemic change that is required to rid our society of gender-based violence.

III- Recommendations

- **Updating definition of IPV:** The term Intimate Partner Violence obscures the fact that, for women with disabilities, the perpetrator can also be a family member, friend, healthcare provider, or personal attendant. We suggest the term **Interpersonal Violence** to reflect this.⁷ Acts of interpersonal violence are classified as family violence or community violence⁸: “Community violence is categorized by two types of perpetrators: acquaintances and strangers. It includes sexual assault by strangers and violence in institutional environments, such as residential care facilities, jails, workplaces, and schools.”

⁵ Riley, K. M. (2011). Violence in the Lives of Muslim Girls and Women in Canada. London Ontario. Available at: <http://www.learningtoendabuse.ca/sites/default/files/Violence%20in%20the%20Lives%20of%20Muslim%20Girls%20and%20Women.pdf>

⁶ Cotter, A. (2018) Violence and Victimization of Women with Disabilities. Statistics Canada. Available at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54910-eng.pdf>

⁷ Powers, Laurie E., et al. “Interpersonal Violence and Women with Disabilities.” Violence Against Women, vol. 15, no. 9, 2009, pp. 1040–1069., doi:10.1177/1077801209340309.

⁸ Rosenberg ML, Butchart A, Mercy J, et al. Interpersonal Violence. In: Jamison DT, Breman JG, Measham AR, et al., editors. Disease Control Priorities in Developing Countries. 2nd edition. Washington (DC): The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank; 2006. Chapter 40. Available from: [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK11721/Co-published by Oxford University Press, New York.](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK11721/Co-published%20by%20Oxford%20University%20Press,%20New%20York)

- **Peer support:** While the issue of gender-based violence against women with disabilities clearly establishes that women with disabilities require unique supports, as noted above, systemic and attitudinal barriers continue to prevent access here. There are women-serving and disability-service organizations who have been built for and by the people they serve and reflect the power of peer support when shared oppressions and shared resilience are organized into solutions – these are the folks whose results need to be examined first and then replicated, but not in the separate siloes, together. Alongside the human rights organizations that are trying to address systemic discrimination, including gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, and status. Building a strong pan Canadian network of women with disability activist and experts in research, education and policy is also essential. This will not happen unless we recognize the important role that civil society organizations like DAWN Canada need to play and we are supported in that work.
- **[Instruments of hope](#):** Systemic change is only possible by taking the long view and staying the course. The National Housing Strategy, the National Action Plan to end Gender Based Violence and the National Early Learning and Child Care Plan are just some of the examples of Federal initiatives that should be coordinated. There are funding mechanisms we know of at ESDC and WAGE and other departments that work well now, or could so that we could see results in pilot communities in each region of the country. It's unfortunate that it's the small organization's like ours that continue to have to bridge these conversations and we are increasingly frustrated by good intentions but no results.
- **Addressing childhood sexual abuse:** In 2017, UN Women stated that some 15 million girls in the world, "have experienced forced sex (forced sexual intercourse or other sexual acts) at some point in their life." UN Women also notes that three out of four child trafficking victims are girls. Specifically concerning girls with disabilities, it reports that an investigation conducted in Uganda in 2014 showed that 24% of girls with disabilities age 11 to 14 said they had been subjected to sexual violence at school, compared to 12% of girls without disabilities.

It's urgent to consider that gendered violence particularly concerns young girls. While they are one of the most vulnerable groups, they are unfortunately little considered both in the civil groups fighting against gender-based violence, and consequently in the legislative frameworks for the fight and prevention. For example, in Quebec, an activist group, [« la voix des jeunes comptent »](#) made up of young women (age 15 to 20) in high school, is calling on the Quebec government to create a bill to fight against the sexual violence they face during their schooling. In view of this, we strongly recommend placing at the center of the legislative framework the groups most vulnerable to gender-based violence and financially assisting groups that carry out direct prevention and support action.

ROOT RESILIENCE, ROOT CHANGE, ROOT JUSTICE.