

## Fact Sheet:

# Violence against Women and Girls with Disabilities



### Introduction

Violence against women and girls with disabilities is a significant issue that is related to both gender and disability-based discrimination and exclusion. Combined, these two factors result in an extremely high risk of violence against girls and women with disabilities.

Despite this high risk, there remains a lack of literature regarding the risks of abuse, experiences of abuse, and barriers to seeking and getting help among girls and women with disabilities. The absence of attention to this issue from both disability and violence researchers has contributed to the invisibility and victimization of women and girls with disabilities.

There are over one billion people with disabilities in the world, corresponding to about 15 per cent of the world's population, and disability disproportionately affects vulnerable populations.<sup>i</sup>

The number of girls and women with disabilities is substantial, and the 2011 World Report on Disability indicates that the female disability prevalence rate is 19.2 per cent, whereas it is 12 per cent for men.<sup>iii</sup>

In low and middle-income countries, this ratio is even more skewed, as women with disabilities comprise 3/4 of all disabled people in these countries.<sup>iv</sup>

65-70 per cent of women with disabilities in low and middle-income countries live in rural areas.<sup>iv</sup>

### Violence against women and girls with disabilities

Discrimination towards people with disabilities, coupled with attitudes towards women in patriarchal societies, put women and girls with disabilities at this increased risk for violence. Although women and girls with disabilities experience many of the same forms of violence that all women experience, when gender and disability intersect, violence has unique forms and causes, and results in unique consequences.<sup>ii</sup> Women and girls with disabilities are particularly targeted by perpetrators of violence because of social exclusion, limited mobility, a lack of support structures, communication barriers, and negative social perceptions. The range of violence experienced by women and girls with disabilities can include physical and sexual violence, as well as emotional and verbal abuse.

- Available data shows that there is a higher rate of violence against women with disabilities than against men with disabilities.<sup>vi</sup>
- Research demonstrates that the incidence of maltreatment and abuse of women with disabilities far exceeds that of women without disabilities.<sup>vii</sup>
- Children with disabilities have a substantially greater risk of being victims of violence than their peers without disabilities<sup>viii</sup>
- In many cases, perpetrators of violence are caregivers, either at home or in institutional settings, and females with disabilities often find themselves trapped by violent partners or family members because they are financially and socially dependent on them for survival.<sup>ix</sup>

## Barriers to accessing treatment and justice

For women and girls with disabilities, the process for reporting violence is often inaccessible because of inadequate policies and standards, negative attitudes, physical access, information availability, communication, lack of service provision, inadequate funding, and lack of involving women with disabilities in decisions that directly affect their lives.

- Many women and girls with disabilities have limited or no access to education and do not know formal sign language, and so communicate only through signs that mainly their close family members understand.<sup>xi</sup>
- Because of the stigma associated with reporting sexual and gender-based violence and the fact that the perpetrators are sometimes members of the family, the presence of an accompanying family member may discourage women from coming forward.<sup>xii</sup>
- Further, police often perceive a woman with an intellectual disability as not being a credible witness, and in such instances they may not proceed with an investigation of the crime.<sup>xiii</sup>

## Conclusion

The importance of addressing the issue of violence against women and girls with disabilities cannot be overstated. The effects of this violence are widespread, and the cost of violence against women and girls is substantial, both monetarily, as well as socially, and it prevents women and girls from realizing their full potential as members of society. The unique intersection of gender and disability must be explored in greater depth in order to ensure that the complexities of violence against women and girls with disabilities are properly understood and addressed.

### *Sexual Violence against Women and Girls with Disabilities*

Studies indicate that women with disabilities are sexually assaulted at a rate at least twice that of the general population of women.<sup>x</sup>

In the case of women with a cognitive or communication disability, their lack of understanding of the situation during a sexual assault and/or their inability to say no can be wrongly perceived as their consent.<sup>xiv</sup>

Girls with disabilities experience discrimination and heightened vulnerability on account of their gender, age, and disability, and girls with intellectual disabilities are particularly vulnerable. It is estimated that between 40 to 70 per cent will be sexually abused before they reach 18 years of age.<sup>xv</sup>

<sup>i</sup> World Health Organizations. 2011. World Report on Disability.

<sup>ii</sup> Ortoleva, S and Lewis, H. 2012. Forgotten Sisters - A Report on Violence Against Women with Disabilities: An Overview of its Nature, Scope, Causes and Consequences.

<sup>iii</sup> World Health Organizations. 2011. World Report on Disability.

<sup>iv</sup> World Bank (2012). Women with disability. <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXT>

<sup>v</sup> International Labour Organization (1999), Integrating women and girls with disabilities into mainstream vocational training. [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms\\_bk\\_pb\\_82\\_en.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_bk_pb_82_en.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. 2009. Crime Against People with Disabilities.

<sup>vii</sup> Iglesias, M. 1998. Violence and women with disability. Vedras, Spain: AIES; The Swedish Research Institute for Disability Policy, HANDUAB. 2007. Men's violence against women with disabilities. Synskadades Riksförbund, The Report Series.

<sup>viii</sup> Jones, L. et al. July 2012. Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities: Systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. The Lancet, Early Online Publication.

<sup>ix</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2010. "As if we weren't human: discrimination and violence against women with disabilities in northern Uganda." New York: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>x</sup> The Roeher Institute. 2004. "Violence against Women with Disabilities." Ottawa, Public Health Agency of Canada.

<sup>xi</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2010. "As if we weren't human: discrimination and violence against women with disabilities in northern Uganda." New York: Human Rights Watch.

<sup>xii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xiii</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>xiv</sup> Janine Benedet and Isabel Grant. 2007. "Hearing the Sexual Assault Complaints of Women with Mental Disabilities: Consent, Capacity, and Mistaken Belief." McGill Law Journal (52 McGill L.J. 243).

<sup>xv</sup> The Roeher Institute. 2004. "Violence against Women with Disabilities." Ottawa, Public Health Agency of Canada.