

Learning Network

WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND D/DEAF WOMEN, HOUSING, AND VIOLENCE

Issue 27, January 2019

Self-identified women with disabilities and D/deaf self-identified women face high rates of poverty and structural violence in Canada.¹ These conditions impact their ability to find and maintain housing. Housing insecurity also increases women's vulnerability to experiencing violence because women find themselves in isolated settings, without support.

When thinking about the issues of precarious housing and violence against women with disabilities and D/deaf women, it is important to situate the discussion in ongoing structural oppression and poverty. Ableism and audism are part of this broader context of oppression.

*"Ableism and ableist views are ideas/beliefs that are based on the assumption that the 'able-body' is favoured/preferred over the disabled body. Similar to the experience of racism, homophobia/transphobia and sexism, socially constructed characteristics of disability position people with disabilities as an 'inferior' group to non-disabled people."*²

*"Similarly, audism can be defined as the devaluation of people who are Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing. An example of this would be assuming that sign language is an inferior language and/or the cultural ways of Deaf people are somehow inferior."*³

Learn More: Read Fran Odette's Op-Ed on "Ableism – A form of Violence Against Women" in the Learning Network Issue: [Violence Against Women with DisAbilities and Deaf Women](#).

Call to Action

- 24% of all women in Canada live with a disability.
[Statistics Canada, Nov. 2018](#)
- Nearly half of all violent victimization is committed against women with a disability.
[Statistics Canada, Mar. 2018](#)
- Almost half of Canadian women ever reporting experiences of homelessness had a disability.
[Statistics Canada, Mar. 2018](#)
- Support women with disabilities and D/deaf women in ensuring needed services are in place.
- Connect to the [MORE THAN A FOOTNOTE](#) call to action by DAWN Canada.

[Please click here to evaluate this Issue!](#)

While this Issue focuses on women with disabilities and D/deaf women, it is important to acknowledge that this is not a homogenous group. Experiences of disability and D/deafness do not define women's rich and textured lives.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND D/DEAF WOMEN

In addition to the violence that all women can experience (e.g. physical, sexual, psychological, financial), women with disabilities and D/deaf women also experience some very specific and unique forms of abuse. Some of these forms of violence are not recognized in the Criminal Code, yet research suggests they are important aspects of lived experience.⁴

- Withholding or sabotaging needed equipment (e.g. wheelchairs, hearing aids, medications, ramps) or harming animal assistants
- Making threats that leaving the relationship will result in institutionalization for the woman, including the possible loss of their home and child (e.g. refusing to interpret or failing to interpret verbal communications with service providers in an attempt to undermine a woman and her decision-making ability)
- Withholding assistance (e.g. denial of access to the bathroom, leaving a woman in a physically uncomfortable or embarrassing position for a long time)
- Violence in attempting to access health and social services, especially when individuals face compounded oppression due to racism and other forms of discrimination from medical professionals (e.g. refusal to provide necessary services)⁵
- Devaluation of skills and strengths which impacts women with disabilities and D/deaf women in their ability to seek housing, employment, and treatment

Women living with disabilities may also experience abuse at the hand of caregivers (e.g. a child, relative, nurse, personal support worker).⁶

Women living with disabilities who are older are particularly likely to face abuse by a caregiver.⁷

Women with disabilities are at a much greater risk of violence when they are also younger, racialized, Indigenous, LGBTQ, immigrant, migrant worker, non-status migrant, or live in rural areas.⁸

Video: *We Can Tell and We Will!* by DAWN RAFH Canada

This Public Service Announcement is based on the D.A.I Supreme Court case that recognizes the right of people with disabilities to be believed when they report sexual assault and abuse.

[Watch the video \(available with subtitles\)](#)

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN LIVING WITH DISABILITIES IN CANADA

Women living with disabilities experience disproportionately high rates of violence.

They face **45%** of all reported incidents of violent crime against women in Canada.

Yet, they only make up **14.9%** of women in Canada.*

Women living with disabilities who have experienced homelessness are **3 times** more likely than other women to self-report violent victimization.

71% of women living with disabilities who have experienced intimate partner violence contact or use formal services.

Women living with disabilities are **about 2 times** more likely than other women to be:

- a victim of violent crime
- victimized in their own home
- sexually assaulted
- victimized multiple times
- emotionally, financially, physically, or sexually abused by a current or former partner
- sexually abused by an adult before age 15
- homeless (visible or hidden) at some point in their lives (Learn more: Read the Learning Network Issue on [Women, Intimate Partner Violence, & Homelessness](#))

Violence among women with a disability who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual is **over 2 times** higher than among women with a disability who identified as heterosexual.

These sobering and alarming statistics indicate:

1. Services for women experiencing violence must be accessible and responsive to the needs of women living with disabilities.
2. Effective violence prevention must increase the safety and security of women living with disabilities.

Source & Definitions: Cotter, A. (2018). [Violent Victimization of Women with Disabilities, 2014](#). Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

* Since the Cotter report, a [Statistics Canada report](#) from November 2018 indicates that there are 24% of women in Canada living with disabilities.

IMPACTS OF VIOLENCE ON WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND D/DEAF WOMEN SEEKING HOUSING

Learning from women living with disabilities and D/deaf women who have experienced violence:

"[S]tarting small – you're dumb etc. even carrying joking too far, to slowly building to full blown violence as well, abuse can be anything from having someone push you to something you don't want to do, name calling, withholding finances, basic necessities, or even leaving a dependent person long periods of time by themselves."⁹

"Hypothetically, I know if I ever, (personally) were in that situation, I'd have to call on someone to help me pack and leave the home or get the police to come and remove the person, either way, depending on the situation, I could be endangering the safety of someone else, not to mention having someone else know details of my private life I may not want people to know. In terms of transportation to a shelter or hospital, I'd have to call a cab or accessibility transportation or a friend or family member..."¹⁰

Many of the impacts of fleeing violence and seeking housing are shared by all women, while some are unique to women with disabilities and D/deaf women. Some of the potential impacts include:

- Loss of financial support due to financial abuse (e.g. a caregiver cashing disability cheques and taking the money)
- Lack of a primary caregiver when leaving an abusive situation
- Extended stay in an inaccessible space (e.g. shelter, hotel, friend's house) due to fleeing violence
- Fear of losing immigration status due to violence and disclosure of disability
- Violations of privacy when seeking support and services
- Vulnerable to further violence and abuse due to precarious and unsafe housing situations, lack of resources, and increased isolation
- Development or intensification of mental and physical health challenges
- Threatened or actual loss of their children (e.g. custody after divorce)

Primary caregivers or mothers with disabilities who experience homelessness and receive assistance from the mental health service system also experience an increased vulnerability to having their children apprehended.¹¹

Learn more: Read [this paper](#) from the DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada about of the living situations of primary caregivers or mothers with disabilities, especially those experiencing and possibly leaving violence.

SELF-IDENTIFIED WOMEN BECOMING DISABLED THROUGH VIOLENCE

Violence against women and children living with disabilities is under-recognized, and there is even less recognition about how violence causes disability. The physical, sexual, psychological, and structural abuse inflicted upon women can result in impairment and disability for some. Two potential disabilities caused by violence are traumatic brain injury and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Traumatic Brain Injury

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) results in cognitive disability and can be caused by physical assaults and attempted strangulation. TBI impacts women in a variety of ways including: headaches, fatigue, seizures, memory loss, difficulty reasoning, depression, and anxiety.

60% to 92% of women who are intimate partner violence survivors were found in a review of the literature to have obtained a TBI associated with intimate partner violence.¹²

9 out of 10 women and trans women sex workers participating in a Toronto study reported obtaining a TBI over their life course with violence (child maltreatment and experiences of violence from intimate partners, friends, clients, and strangers) as a major cause.¹³

42% of women experiencing homelessness in Toronto were found to have a TBI.¹⁴ Often, the first experience of TBI occurred at a young age, and before the first episode of homelessness, suggesting that TBI may be a casual factor in the onset of homelessness.¹⁵

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the result of a traumatic event including threatened death, serious injury, and sexual violence. Impacts of PTSD include: nightmares, flashbacks, disassociation, and hypervigilance.

Rates of PTSD for women who have experienced intimate partner violence range from 45% to 84%.¹⁶

Exposure to intimate partner violence has been found to lead to PTSD for some children and youth.¹⁷ Intergenerational trauma also increases stressors and can “increase risk for PTSD after a traumatic event is experienced.”¹⁸

The impacts of TBI and PTSD can affect employment, education, relationships, housing, and responses from services. A lack of recognition regarding how violence causes disability can therefore affect women with disabilities and D/deaf women in accessing resources and establishing safety for themselves and their family.

BARRIERS WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND D/DEAF WOMEN FLEEING VIOLENCE FACE WHEN SEEKING SAFE, AFFORDABLE, AND ACCESSIBLE HOUSING

Barriers may be compounded for self-identified women with disabilities and D/deaf self-identified women who experience multiple oppressions (e.g. racism, classism, heterosexism, cisgenderism, colonialism). These intersecting oppressions impact rates of homelessness, unemployment, and poverty, while creating barriers to help-seeking.

- Difficulties within the legal arena can be faced by all women fleeing violence; however, women who have disabilities and D/deaf women may face additional difficulties (e.g. the officer needs to be prepared to think about access and accommodations when taking a statement).¹⁹
- Women with disabilities and D/deaf women may face difficulty accessing services as both disability-related services and services for survivors of violence may not be equipped to respond to their needs. One study of Muslim immigrant women's and girls' experiences in Canada found that a woman with a disability could not access immigrant-focused or disability-focused services as neither believed she was within their mandate to support.²⁰
- Women with disabilities face more barriers than women without disabilities in participating in the work force (61.3% vs. 83.4% participation) and this impacts their ability to pay for housing and other needs.²¹ Learn more: Read [this policy brief](#) on the economic security of women with disabilities by DAWN Canada.
- Some women experience violence and harassment by their abuser at their workplace (e.g. unwanted disclosure of their disability, damage of necessary equipment) that may result in loss of employment.
- Disability-related expenditures for services and assistive technologies, which are not covered by public health insurance, can significantly increase the cost of appropriate housing.²² Women with disabilities may have unmet needs due to these costs. 41% of women with disabilities living in poverty and 24% of women with disabilities living above the poverty line cannot afford required aids and medication.²³
- Discrimination in housing (e.g. "screening out" practices by landlords for women fleeing violence or women living with disabilities) pose a challenge for women seeking and securing housing.²⁴
- A lack of accessible and affordable housing contributes to homelessness. In large Canadian cities, there may be limited affordable and safe housing. In rural, remote, and northern communities, housing options may be scarcer which could lead to women living in overcrowded and/or unsafe housing.²⁵

A MODEL FOR ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE SHELTERS

It is important to envision what an accessible future looks like, even if there are barriers (e.g. financial, political) to realizing that future right now. Part of that question must include how we can make safe spaces for self-identified women with disabilities and D/deaf self-identified women when fleeing violence. Some things that an accessible and inclusive shelter can do include:

PUBLIC OUTREACH:

- Indicate what services you can and cannot provide on your website and over the phone, including ASL videos describing services offered, or captioned videos
- Develop an accessible website that is compliant with software applications and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)

INTAKE:

- Ask the woman what kinds of supports she needs in order for the space to be accessible (e.g. ask what accommodations she needs during the intake interview)
- Have materials given at intake and during the woman's stay in different languages and alternative formats (e.g. large print, audio or braille). As well, schedule a time to meet with the woman and discuss any concerns she may have after settling into the shelter
- Ensure your agency does not ask for proof of legal status in Canada in order to access services. If you require ID to track numbers for the purpose of reporting to funders, create alternatives so that you can serve non-status clients who are living with violence (Learn more: Access *Learning Network Issue 26* on [Intimate Partner Violence Against Immigrant and Refugee Women](#))

ENVIRONMENT:

- Include multiple ramps in the event of emergency evacuation or fire
- Utilize audio and tactile signage in public or common living areas including the kitchen and the laundry room. This can include having a tactile map at the entrance and available during intake so women can orient themselves to the space
- Support the delivery of LGBTQ2S specific housing options (Learn more: Read *Learning Network Issue 24* on [LGBTQ2S Youth, Violence, and Homelessness](#))
- Allow individuals to bring in their animal companions for support
- Have doorways that are wide enough for a wheelchair or scooter

STAFF:

- Teach staff about disability and D/deafness (Learn more: Access the [AODA e-learning: Improving Access to Violence Against Women Services for Women with Disabilities](#) by Springtide Resources)
- Involve women living with disabilities and D/deaf women in reviews and discussions about the shelter
- Create and enforce a non-discrimination policy that includes anti-ableism/audism principles for staff and volunteers
- Hire and promote women living with disabilities and D/deaf women as staff or in volunteer positions, such as active Board members

PROGRAMMING AND SUPPORTS:

- Utilize the services of ASL and spoken language interpreters that women tell you they trust or prefer
- Identify and connect with grassroots agencies and resources (e.g. Indigenous women's agencies, agencies serving immigrant and refugee people, LGBTQ2S agencies, Associations for Community Living) in order to assist you in providing supports
- Contain culturally safe spaces and programs (e.g. the [Nihdawin program by the Ontario Native Women's Association](#))
- Offer opportunities for land-based healing by ensuring proximity and accessibility to gardens, parks, and bodies of water
- Advance educational opportunities for women and their children
- Create a social enterprise to provide economic opportunities and employment

LEARN MORE:

- Use the [National Accessibility and Accommodation Survey \(NAAS\)](#) to audit the accessibility of your spaces. The NAAS is a practical tool for any organization serving women with disabilities and D/deaf women, shelters, and transition houses in particular. This audit tool is divided into three sections to help you understand the accessibility and accommodation needs of women with disabilities and D/deaf women.
- Read the report [Women with Disabilities and Abuse: Access to Supports](#) by DAWN Canada.

THE RESILIENCE OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AND D/DEAF WOMEN

A women-centered and strengths-based approach recognizes the resilience of women, including those living with disabilities and D/deaf women. This approach focuses on listening when women with disabilities and D/deaf women regularly advocate for themselves and others, including their recommendations on how to address violence and homelessness in Canada.

For example, read the recommendations from the project: *Toronto - A Place to Call Our Own: Empowering Women to Take Action for Affordable Housing*, shared in Women with Disabilities & Housing - [Learning Network Brief #35](#).

When we use a strengths-based approach, we challenge how systemic violence operates to exclude women from economic and social resources that would aid in their ability to access education, housing, and employment. This exclusion is compounded by oppression experienced due to ableism, audism, ageism, racism, colonialism, heteronormativity, cis-normativity, and other oppressions.

Organizations playing a leadership role in ending violence against women with disabilities and D/deaf women!

[DisAbled Women's Network/Reseau d'action des femmes handicapées \(DAWN-RAFH\) Canada](#) is a national, feminist, cross-disability organization that has provided opportunities for self-determination and leadership development for women with disabilities. Grounded in the lived experiences of women with disabilities and Deaf women, and using an evidence-based approach, DAWN Canada works to create change at a systemic level in order to directly improve the quality of life for women with disabilities.

Video: [More Than A Footnote: Women With Disabilities are One Quarter of All Women in This Country](#) with Bonnie Brayton from DAWN RAFH Canada (available with subtitles).

[Springtide Resources](#) develops and implements programs aimed at responding to the growing prevention, intervention and educational needs of those working toward ending violence against women and their children. Springtide offers resources and online training to help service providers effectively support and advocate for women with disabilities.

THE CASE FOR MARGINALIZED WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY

BY DORIS RAJAN

There is a limited gender lens in housing research and advocacy work, thus women, in general, are rarely recognized as a distinct oppressed group with unique housing needs. Further, 'women' as a category is too broad and when used generically tends to make invisible the most deeply entrenched needs of extremely marginalized populations of women.

Over the past decade, in my community and advocacy work largely conducted with [IRIS-the Institutes for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society](#) and [DAWN Canada](#), I have noted that when women have worked collectively around an issue, there is a struggle to include the participation and experiences of refugee, largely racialized women, and women with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities - even within the broader women with disabilities and immigrant women's movements.

When Indigenous women are included in larger scale generic 'women's' efforts, it can feel tokenistic because there is rarely a reflection of the vast diversity that exists between nations, cultures, languages, regional histories and experiences. Further, the most marginalized populations of women-identified people, usually live within and across multiple experiences of disadvantage or social locations.

Therefore, in my doctoral research and my work with IRIS and our partners, we have made an intentional choice to focus exclusively on Indigenous, refugee women and women with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities, because these particular populations of women experience persistent violence, poverty and thus housing inequity. Further, through IRIS' community organizing, development and advocacy work with coalitions made up of specific grassroots marginalized women's populations in Vancouver, Regina, Toronto and Saint John – we address the issues of poverty, violence against women and housing together in recognition of the role poverty and housing insecurity plays in violence production.

We believe that by addressing the needs of the most marginalized women, we find solutions that will benefit all people who are struggling with finding suitable, safe housing and dealing with poverty and violence.

Read the full Learning Network Brief by Doris Rajan on [Women with Disabilities & Housing](#).

PLEASE EVALUATE US!

Let us know what you think. Your input is important to us. Please complete this brief survey on your thoughts of this Issue: https://uwo.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1I9p3YP1luzGsTz

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