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Snapshot #1  
March 2019

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## DisAbleD Women's Network of Canada

### Girls with Disabilities in Canada: A Snapshot of Systemic Violence & Opportunities for Empowerment

#### To Our Readers:

The DisAbleD Women's Network of Canada (DAWN) is a national, feminist, cross-disability organization that has provided opportunities for self-determination and leadership development for women with disabilities for more than 30 years. Our mission is to end the poverty, isolation, discrimination and violence experienced by Canadian women with disabilities and Deaf women.

Our work to examine violence against women and girls with disabilities has allowed us to identify existing gaps in research, education, and policy. In general, we have found a lack of information and resources focused on the experiences of girls with disabilities.

In this first snapshot we will provide an overview of what is known about the lived experiences of girls with disabilities and violence, as well as opportunities for empowerment that have been identified.

## Girls with Disabilities & Violence

In 2018, the United Nations noted that girls and young women with disabilities face unique barriers based on both disability and gender.<sup>1</sup> Our own research support this, as we see the extent to which an intersectional lens is needed to understand the lived experiences of girls and young women with disabilities.

Internationally, where girls are concerned we know that about 120 million girls (1 in 10) have been forced to have sex, and that girls account for almost ¾ of human trafficking victims.<sup>2</sup> When we move beyond a gender lens and include disability we know the following:

- One Ugandan survey indicates that 24% of girls aged 11-14 have experienced sexual violence at school (compared to 12% for girls without disabilities).<sup>3</sup>
- Girls with disabilities are exposed to and victimized by a range of individuals including intimate partners, family members, caregivers and assistants, health professionals and service providers - all with varying power dynamics.<sup>4</sup>
- One study found that teenage girls with physical disabilities and/or with long-term health issues were more likely than girls without disabilities to be forced to have sex.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.N.F.P.A (2018), Young Persons With Disabilities: Global Study On Ending Gender-Based Violence, 1 And Realising Sexual And Reproductive Health And Rights, Page 26.

<sup>2</sup> O.N.U La violence à l'égard des femmes et des filles: Quelques Fait et Chiffres, dernière modification 2017. [http:// www.unwomen.org/fr/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures](http://www.unwomen.org/fr/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures)

<sup>3</sup> Devries, K., Kyegome, N., Zuurmond, M., Parkes, J., Child, J., Walakira, E. et Naker, D. (2014). Violence against primary 3 school children with disabilities in Uganda: a cross-sectional study, p. 6

<sup>4</sup> Pearce E, Paik K & Robles J. O (2016), Adolescent Girls with Disabilities in Humanitarian Settings, ' I Am Not 'Worthless - I 5 Am Girl with a Lot to Share and Other », *Girlhood Studies* 9, n° 1, 118-136, page 122.

<sup>5</sup> Alriksson-Schmidt A.I, Armour B.S, Thibadeau J.K. (2010) Are adolescent girls with a physical disability at increased risk for 15 sexual violence? *J Sch Health*. 361-367.

## Gender, Disability, & Violence: Canadian Context

In Canada, we have no recent statistical data specific to girls with disabilities and violence, yet we know the following in terms of the gendered nature of violence, abuse, and disability:<sup>6</sup>

- In 45% of all incidents of violence, including sexual assault, theft, physical violence, the victims were women with disabilities.
- 38% of women with disabilities report physical or sexual assault before the age of 15, and 18% report sexual abuse by an adult before the age of 15.
- Women with a disability most often reported their perpetrator was a friend, acquaintance, or neighbour (44%) and 30% incidents of victimization occurred in the home.

## The Need for an Intersectional Lens

For women with disabilities, the risk of violence increases when they are racialized, younger, Indigenous, LGBTQI2S, migrant workers, immigrants, non-status migrants or living in rural areas.<sup>7</sup> While the statistics around violence against women with disabilities speaks to the gendered nature of this issue, an intersectional lens uncovers patterns that impact certain groups of women with disabilities in troubling ways:<sup>8</sup>

- Women with disabilities who experience violence as children are almost two times as likely as those who had not experienced physical abuse to be victimized in the last 12 months.

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<sup>6</sup> 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>

<sup>7</sup> Canadian Labour Congress (2017) Submission to Employment and Social Development Canada on Accessibility Legislation for Canadians with Disabilities. Available at: <http://documents.clc-ctc.ca/whr/DISAB-Rights/ODI-Legislation/SEP-CanadiansWithDisabilitiesAct-Submission-ElizabethKwan-2017-02-24.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> 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>

- In general, women with disabilities who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual experience 2.3 times higher rates of violence than among heterosexual women with disabilities.
- Women who experience mental health related disabilities and those with cognitive disabilities experience disproportionately high rates of sexual assault.

Other research supports the need for an intersectional lens as it indicates:

- Aboriginal women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable and thus bigger targets for sexual predators.<sup>9</sup>
- Indigenous children with disabilities remain one of the most oppressed groups in Canada.<sup>10</sup>
- Where refugees are concerned, women and girls remain exposed to sexual violence due to long processing times and a lack of laws to protect them from human trafficking.<sup>11</sup>

Given the gendered nature of violence and abuse where women with disabilities are concerned, and international data, it is safe to assume that in Canada as well, girls with disabilities are at a particularly high risk of violence.

## **Promoting Positive Spaces and Relationships for Girls with Disabilities**

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<sup>9</sup> Gehl L. & Whittington-Walsh F, Indigenous women and girls with disabilities bigger targets of sexual violence, 2016. [http:// 18rabble.ca/news/2016/02/indigenous-women-and-girls-disabilities-bigger-targets-sexual-violence](http://18rabble.ca/news/2016/02/indigenous-women-and-girls-disabilities-bigger-targets-sexual-violence)

<sup>10</sup> Dion J. (2017), Falling Through the Cracks: Canadian Indigenous Children with Disabilities , International Human Rights 19 Internships Program- Working Paper Series, Spring Volume 5 n°12. page 32.

<sup>11</sup> Conseil Canadien pour les Réfugiés, Immigrations et Réfugiés - points saillants pour les femmes et les filles , 2013. [http:// 20ccrweb.ca/fr/femmes-points-saillants-2013](http://20ccrweb.ca/fr/femmes-points-saillants-2013)

While the research is grim and certainly indicates a crisis for women and girls with disabilities, there are spaces where we see positive and empowering outcomes for girls with disabilities.

As an example, leisure and sport can serve as important spaces to empower girls and young women and can help them build important connections and support systems among their peers. Here are some of the benefits for girls who engage in sports and leisure:

- While girls with disabilities may experience few opportunities to acquire a positive image of their bodies, sports and leisure may provide help to counter this.<sup>12</sup>
- Participating in leisure activities can promote higher self-esteem.<sup>13</sup>
- Teenage girls who participate in sports and leisure may develop empowerment skills.<sup>14</sup>
- One of the key motivations for participation in sports for disabled children are social, which can not only build peer support networks but also provide important opportunities to connect with mentors.<sup>15</sup>
- A lack of participation in leisure activities outside of school can lead to less overall enjoyment of social activities.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, while we know these contacts and opportunities can have positive and important impacts, girls and young women remain underrepresented in these activities.<sup>17</sup> We need to collectively address the range of

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<sup>12</sup> Halliwell E. (2015), Future Directions for positive body Image Research, “*This state of embodiment involves feeling competent, free to act and express individuality through the body, and free to challenge sociocultural standards* » Elsevier, 702, page 13.

<sup>13</sup> Melbøe L., Borgunn Y., (2017) Disability leisure: in what kind of activities, and when and how do youths with intellectual disabilities participate?, « *physical activities offer the opportunity to contribute to well-being, improved physical fitness and an increased perception of self-efficacy and social competence (Hutzler and Korsensky 2010). In other words, aspects of participation in leisure activities can contribute to enhancing the quality of life of people with disabilities (Badia et al. 2013)* ». Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 19:3, page 245.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson D.M, Wozencroft A., Bedini L.A, Adolescent girls' involvement in Disability Sport : a comparison of Social Support Mechanisms, Journal Of Leisure Research, 40 (2), page 185.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson D.M, Wozencroft A., Bedini L.A, Adolescent girls' involvement in Disability Sport : a comparison of Social Support Mechanisms, Journal Of Leisure Research, 40 (2), page 194.

<sup>16</sup> King G. , Law M. , Hurley P. , Petrenchik T. & Schwellnus H., (2010) A Developmental Comparison of the Out- of- school Recreation and Leisure Activity Participation of Boys and Girls With and Without Physical Disabilities, International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 57:1, 77.

barriers (gender, disability etc.) that continue to prevent girls and young women with disabilities from accessing these activities, supports, and networks.

## **An Example from DAWN Canada: Girls Without Barriers**

DAWN Canada is currently leading a project entitled “Girls Without Barriers” that is focused on creating peer support, empowerment and leadership opportunities for girls with disabilities between the ages of 9-13.

[Girls without Barriers](#) seeks to identify and address gaps in research regarding the needs of girls with disabilities as well as to increase the participation of girls with disabilities and Deaf girls in girl-serving programs. Funded by the Canadian Women's Foundation, the initiative also aims to change the culture within girl-serving organizations by fostering careful, diligent and thorough inclusion of the needs of girls with disabilities and Deaf girls. Girls with disabilities and Deaf girls not only benefit from improved accessibility of programs but also get opportunities to develop their confidence and leadership as they witness their ideas and opinions transform into concrete actions.

As part of this initiative, DAWN Canada partnered with Rock Camp for Girls and Gender Nonconforming Youth to create a one-week musical camp for girls and gender non-confirming youth with and without disabilities. Next steps include publishing research on girls with disabilities, workshops on ableism for girls with disabilities and non-disabled girls alike, workshops for program organizers, and the development of online resources.

## **Conclusion**

DAWN Canada is committed to using our four pillars, research, education, policy and advocacy, to address systemic violence against girls with disabilities. We are equally committed to promoting opportunities for girls with disabilities to engage, empower and lead in ways that bring about meaningful change.

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson D.M, Wozencroft A., Bedini L.A (2008), Adolescent girls' involvement in Disability Sport : a comparison of Social Support Mechanisms, Journal Of Leisure Research, 40 (2), 183-207.