



DisAbled Women's Network of Canada/
Réseau d'action des femmes
handicapées Canada

Parliamentary Brief

Women with Disabilities and Access to Shelters and Transition Houses

A Brief Prepared for the Standing Committee on the Status of Women in
Canada (FEWO) for their

Study of the System of Shelters and Transition Houses in Canada

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Leadership, Partnership & Networking

**ABOUT THE DISABLED
WOMEN'S NETWORK OF
CANADA (DAWN CANADA)**

DisAbleD Women's Network (DAWN) Canada is a national, feminist, cross-disability organization whose mission is to end the poverty, isolation, discrimination and violence experienced by Canadian women with disabilities and Deaf women. DAWN is an organization that works towards the advancement and inclusion of women and girls with disabilities and Deaf women in Canada. Our overarching strategic theme is one of leadership, partnership and networking to engage all levels of government and the wider disability and women's sectors and other stakeholders in addressing our key issues.

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Women with Disabilities and Access to Shelters and Transition Houses

Introduction

Access to shelters and transition houses has been a central preoccupation for organizations serving women with disabilities for as long as they have existed. DAWN Canada has conducted several national studies that confirm that the traditional shelter system is still not responding to our needs.

Shelters and transition houses are already grossly under-resourced. They are often inaccessible, and there are not enough of them to adequately deal with the population of women they are tasked with supporting.

For years now, DAWN Canada has been alerting policy makers to the fact that women are becoming disabled through violence; data and research presented in this brief confirms this and begins to outline the size and scope of the problem.

Recent and highly publicized data on the long term impact of brain injuries, including brain injuries from sports, combat and in first responders show that frequent blows to the head, sudden trauma, and repeated trauma all contribute to brain trauma and to the onset of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Most women who are showing up at shelters have almost certainly experienced violence more than once, have been choked, hit, threatened or traumatized – all the conditions which would lead to brain injury and PTSD. And shelters are not equipped to routinely conduct screening for brain injury and PTSD.

Intellectual disability also places women, including young women and girls, at higher risk of repeated violence and abuse. Stigma and poor screening for milder intellectual disabilities and learning disabilities especially in girls is one of the reasons that these same women become hugely over-represented in the homeless community, in a range of human trafficking contexts and in the prison population.

Shelters and transition houses are a vitally important part of the solution for the millions of women and girls with disabilities who need a safe place to be, but we are currently falling far short of the existing needs. Solutions must go beyond bricks and mortar and beds to encompass the full range of issues which must be addressed in order for all women to be safe.

Disability is underreported

According to Statistics Canada 2012 data, 2.1 million women (14.9%) aged 15 or older reported having one or more disabilities that limited them in their daily activities.¹ However, because much of the data is based on self-identification, some populations including brain injured women, women living with episodic and chronic illnesses or pain, and women with intellectual and learning disabilities are not identified as having disabilities and therefore are not included statistics. The actual number of women with disabilities is therefore easily upwards of 20% of the population, with estimates for Indigenous women at 35% or more than one third.

Women with disabilities experience higher rates of violence and abuse

Women with disabilities experience higher rates of violence and abuse. In March 2018 the Canadian Centre For Justice Statistics released a report entitled *Violent Victimization of Women with Disabilities*². The report revealed that 45% of all incidents of violent crime, including sexual assault, robbery, or physical assault, the victims were women with disabilities, according to the General Social Survey (GSS) on Canadians' Safety (Victimization).

Women with disabilities are also at higher risk of Intimate Partner Violence. A 2009 US study showed that women with disabilities are more likely (33%) to experience intimate partner violence than non-disabled women (21%) and “might have fewer resources to escape, including financial means, knowledge of where and how to report, or a battered women’s shelter that she can travel to or that is physically accessible to her”³.

Furthermore, a woman’s risk of violence increases when disability intersects with other forms of discrimination. As the Canadian Labour Congress noted in their 2017 submission to the government of Canada on federal accessibility legislation, “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.”⁴

¹ Amanda Burlock, *Women in Canada: A Gender-based Statistical Report Catalogue- Women with Disabilities*, 2017 <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14695-eng.pdf?st=Kd94zkYs>

² Adam Cotter, *Violent victimization of Women with disabilities*, 2014, Canadian Centre For Justice Statistics, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54910-eng.pdf?st=LmMe7AVm>

³ Kirsten A & al, *Intimate Partner Violence, Health Status, And Health Care Access Among Women With Disabilities*, *Women’s Health Issues* 19 (2009), p95.

⁴Submission by the Canadian Labour Congress to the Employment and Social Development Canada c/o Office for Disability Issues regarding the Consultation - Accessibility Legislation for Canadians with Disabilities. February, 2017. <http://documents.clc-ctc.ca/whr/DISAB-Rights/ODI-Legislation/SEP-CanadiansWithDisabilitiesAct-Submission-ElizabethKwan-2017-02-24.pdf>

Women with disabilities are by no means a homogenous group and their experiences of violence and needs related to violence prevention and support, including shelter access and accommodations, are not uniform. A 2017 US⁵ study which analyzed the demographic profile of survivors of intimate partner violence who had disabilities concluded that:

“women with disabilities are diverse socially, culturally, and demographically. Each woman’s assessment, intervention, outreach, safety planning, and criminal justice needs are shaped by her disability profile. Accordingly, meaningful social work-related services must consider not only aspects of identity that have been long recognized for their importance (e.g., race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigration status) but also the full range of modifications required to ensure equal access across disability types.”

Shelters are rarely accessible for women with disabilities

The Statistics Canada 2009 Family Violence in Canada report indicated that approximately 10% of women residing in shelters reported having a disability.⁶ Yet both disability related services and services for victims of abuse are not always able to respond to the needs of women with disabilities. Only 75% of shelters report having a wheelchair accessible entrance, 66% of shelters provided wheelchair accessible rooms and bathrooms, 17% of shelters provide sign language, and 5% offer braille reading materials.⁷ The general lack of accessibility features in shelters across Canada prevents many women with disabilities from being able to use shelter services. However, shelters report lack of stable, long-term funding is a significant challenge in making their facilities accessible.

But accessibility extends well beyond physical accommodations. In 2009, DAWN Canada conducted a National Accessibility and Accommodation Survey (NAAS) of women’s shelters and transition houses to assess the level of accessibility and accommodation for women with disabilities within Canadian shelters. The study revealed that accessibility was often equated with wheelchair access, which is indicative of the fact that shelter workers do not understand the complexity of disability and how women with various disabilities can be best accommodated.

⁵Michelle S. B & al « *Looking Beyond Prevalence: A Demographic Profile of Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence With Disabilities* » Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Vol. 29(17), 2014. Page 3171

⁶ Stats can cited in Vecova study

⁷ DisAbled Women’s Network of Canada / Réseau d’Actions des femmes Handicapées Canada. DAWN Canada. “More Than A Footnote: A Research Report on Women and Girls with Disabilities in Canada”, May 2018, 1st Edition.

The study also concluded that shelters need to enhance their outreach to community organizations, police and social workers to ensure women with disabilities know of their services. Even before arriving a shelter, women with disabilities face many barriers to reporting violence and trying to get out of situations of violence.

Geographical location also affects access. According to Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, Canadian statistics to show that the North has some of the highest rates of family and gendered violence in the country. Yet, they note that “more than 70 per cent of the 53 Inuit communities spread across four geographic regions of the Canadian Arctic do not have a safe shelter for women and children experiencing family violence.”⁸

Women are becoming disabled through violence

Beyond the alarming rates of violence experienced by women with disabilities, it has been found that women are becoming disabled, or further disabled, due to intimate partner or interpersonal violence.

In DAWN Canada’s 2018 report on women and girls with disabilities⁹ it was noted that “there are important links between domestic violence and disability as it has been estimated as many as 276,000 women in Canada will experience Traumatic Brain Injury annually as the result of intimate partner violence.

As well, several studies, including a 2008 study have confirmed that the impact of intimate partner violence (IPV) on women survivors is profound, and the resulting mental health impairments associated with IPV include depression, low self-esteem, psychological distress and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The authors note that women survivors are at considerable risk of developing PTSD.¹⁰

⁸ <https://www.pauktuutit.ca/abuse-prevention/shelters-and-transitional-housing/>

⁹ DisAbled Women’s Network of Canada / Réseau d’Actions des femmes Handicapées Canada. DAWN Canada. “More Than A Footnote: A Research Report on Women and Girls with Disabilities in Canada”, May 2018, 1st Edition.

¹⁰ Women survivors of intimate partner violence and post-traumatic stress disorder: Prediction and prevention. DeJonghe ES, Bogat, G.A. , Levendosky A.A. , and von Eye, A. Postgrad Med. October 2008 Vol 54 Issue 4

A study¹¹ by the Acquired Brain Injury Research Lab at the University of Toronto noted that 89% of respondents (which were Toronto area organizations that offer services to women survivors of IPV) had no previous experience or training about Acquired Brain Injury resulting from IPV, even though existing research suggests that up to 80% of women survivors of IPV may have brain injury.

Recommendations

Research:

- Conduct research on the use of universal design and intersectional practice in shelters and transition houses as a means of ensuring services are provided for all women and the conduct pilot implementation sites in each province and territory;
- Investigate the development of a protocol or screening questions for women entering shelters and transition houses to identify possible TBI (Traumatic brain injury), ABI (acquired brain injury), PTSD or other disabilities resulting from violence.
- Research alternative housing solutions including increasing low barrier service delivery practices in shelters and transition houses ;

Policy:

- The results of DAWN Canada's recent project Legislation, Policy and Service Responses to Violence Against Women with Disabilities showed that women with disabilities are absent from policies related to violence prevention and support. They are either relegated to the footnotes of such policies or are subsumed into larger groups of "vulnerable populations" which effectively negates their specific experiences as women. Disability must be central in the development of related policies and programs. **It is therefore urgent, as the most important first step, to review all federal and provincial housing and shelter policies to see where the gaps exist for women and girls with disabilities**, and then to revise those policies and the related programmatic responses so that they meet the needs of women and girls with disabilities.
- Such policies and programs must include adequate measures and mechanisms for addressing violence against women with disabilities, must also be careful not to consider them as a homogenous group and must

¹¹ Battered and Brain Injured: Identifying and Supporting Brain Injured Women Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence. Colantonio, Angela and Haag, Halina (Principal Investigators). Acquired Brain Injury Research Lab. 2018.

consider the needs of rural and northern women.

- Responding to the needs of women with disabilities requires a cross-ministerial and cross-departmental approach that includes not only a focus of gender, but also disability, housing, and justice/victims services, among others. DAWN Canada recommends coordinated calls for proposals which will support shelters and transitions houses to examine their hiring and board recruitment, their built environments as well as their service delivery, particularly their community outreach strategy to include women with disabilities.

Education:

- Support and adequately fund pre- and in-service training for police, victims services and front line service workers to ensure that they are aware of and able to meet the needs of women with disabilities;
- Ensure that police, victim's services, health care and front line service workers are trained on how to screen women who are victims of violence for traumatic TBI (Traumatic brain injury), ABI (acquired brain injury), PTSD or other disabilities resulting from violence.

Advocacy:

Women with disabilities experience all types of violence at higher rates than non-disabled women.

- In view of the large number of women with disabilities who are victims of violence, it is MOST urgent to increase the number of beds available, and also to facilitate access for these women. It is important to remember that currently there is not one single shelter, nor front-line service organization developed to meet the specific needs of women with disabilities and Deaf women who experience violence.
- DAWN Canada recommends that in every province, a minimum of 25% of the resources for shelters and transitions houses be dedicated to meet the specific needs of women with disabilities.
- The voices of women with disabilities must be heard and believed.

Conclusion

Canada has since 2016 been reviewed and rebuked by at least three (3) United Nations bodies and by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women as recently as this year for its repeated failure in its obligations to women and girls with disabilities and Deaf women and girls. This includes the Covenant on Economic and Social Rights, The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. We challenge the Chair and all the members of this Committee to address this in its recommendations to Parliament following this study. Disability is the one intersection that all women in Canada may experience at some point in their lives, regardless of any other factor and it goes beyond race, class, sexual orientation or geography. Women are becoming disabled through violence – let's work together to make sure that all women in Canada can expect there to be a safe place and a bed waiting for them.