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Understanding the Abuse and Trafficking of Women and Girls Who Have an Intellectual Disability in Canada

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About Community Living Ontario

Community Living Ontario is a non-profit provincial association that has been advocating with and for people who have an intellectual disability and their families for more than 70 years. We proudly work alongside 124 local agencies and advocate on behalf of more than 100,000 people across Ontario.

www.communitylivingontario.ca

For more information, please contact:

Shawn Pegg

Director of Social Policy and Strategic Initiatives

Community Living Ontario

shawn@communitylivingontario.ca

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Executive Summary

A wealth of research shows that women and girls who have an intellectual disability experience much higher levels of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse compared to the general population. In Canada, the rate of violent victimization among women with cognitive disabilities (which include learning, intellectual and memory disabilities) is [four times higher](#) than for those without a disability.

While both men and women with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be physically, emotionally and sexually abused, women are at greatest risk. As just one example of this, half of women with cognitive disabilities [report](#) having been physically or sexually abused before the age of 15.

Women and girls who have an intellectual disability are also highly vulnerable to human trafficking. We know that women and girls who have intellectual and other disabilities are highly likely to live in poverty, to have limited circles of support, and to experience a range of unmet disability-related needs. These gaps drastically increase their vulnerability to abuse and trafficking.

A recent [systematic review](#) found that traffickers exploit the socio-economic, relationship, therapeutic, and rehabilitative needs of women with disabilities. In other words, they lure and entrap victims by offering things they would otherwise not have access to, including money, food, pain relief, and companionship.

These facts speak to the pressing need to (a) increase the economic and social power of women and girls, (b) empower women and girls with intellectual disabilities to make decisions and control their own lives, (c) include people with intellectual disabilities specifically in policy and program documents re: abuse and human trafficking, and (d) ensure the ongoing viability of organizations that serve and support people who have an intellectual disability.

A. Overview

Women and girls who have an intellectual disability are at high risk of abuse and trafficking due to various factors including social marginalization, stereotyping, and discrimination; social isolation; fear of losing supports and resources; and low educational attainment and unemployment.

Women and girls with intellectual disabilities experience the same types of abuse that all women face, including verbal, psychological, financial, and sexual abuse, as well as denial of access to services, inappropriate treatment by caregivers, destruction of property, and coercive control.

Disabled women also experience unique forms of abuse, including withholding or sabotaging equipment, withholding assistance with activities of daily living, threats of institutionalization, and disability-related taunting. Women with disabilities are highly likely to experience more than one type of abuse.^{1, 2, 3}

B. Social marginalization, stereotyping, and discrimination

People with intellectual disabilities frequently find that their mental capacity is underestimated.⁴ They face prejudiced assumptions about their credibility, their capability of understanding abuse, and the trustworthiness of their testimonies. Perpetrators may additionally take advantage of communication differences that are common among people with intellectual disabilities.⁵

Social marginalization of women and girls with intellectual disabilities can stem from negative public attitudes, social isolation, lack of accessibility in transportation and communication, and reliance on others for care.⁶ Perpetrators target women with intellectual disabilities because the marginalization and barriers they face work to decrease their power, make them more vulnerable to control, and limit their ability to report abuse.⁷

The 2020 *R v. Slatter* case showcases the marginalization, stereotyping, and barriers that women with intellectual disabilities can face in preventing and responding to abuse and trafficking. In this case the defendant was found guilty of sexually assaulting a woman with an intellectual disability. However, the Ontario Court of Appeal overturned the conviction because of stereotyped beliefs about the suggestibility and reliability of witnesses with intellectual disabilities.⁸

While the *R v. Slatter* decision was eventually overturned by the Supreme Court of Canada, the case brings attention to the intersecting barriers (including stereotyping and

infantilization) faced by women with intellectual disabilities in preventing victimization and accessing justice. Many women with intellectual disabilities have had negative experiences with police and the justice system, including not having their reports of abuse investigated, and being discouraged from reporting abuse.⁹

C. Social isolation

Isolation can reduce opportunities to build support systems and access services in the community, thereby heightening women's vulnerability to abuse. Many women and girls who have an intellectual disability are socially isolated and lack sufficient circles of support. They are often shielded from the broader community by family members and may have little experience with managing novel situations.

Women with intellectual disabilities are more likely to reside in institutional settings (including group homes, mental health facilities, hospitals, and long-term care facilities) that separate and exclude them from the community. Because of this exclusion and limited experience, they are at risk to traffickers who understand how to seek out and take advantage of vulnerability. More generally, when women with limited social experience get involved in relationships, they are at risk of becoming dependent on their partner and/or caregiver(s), which can lead to power imbalances and negative relationship dynamics.¹⁰

D. Fear of losing supports and resources

Women who have an intellectual disability face pervasive poverty and must often rely on partners and/or caregivers to access an increased income and to have their basic needs met; this can make them hesitant to leave abusive situations.¹¹ Additionally, like all of us, women with disabilities have a fundamental need for intimacy and belonging. Unfortunately, they typically have fewer opportunities to form positive social connections. Thus, women may stay with abusive partners as it may be preferable to social isolation.^{12, 13, 14, 15}

E. Low educational attainment and unemployment

Education is a key social determinant of health, as it is closely connected with other determinants such as employment and income.¹⁶ Less than half of adults with intellectual disabilities have completed high school, compared to 87% among people without disabilities.¹⁷ They are often placed in segregated classes that prevent them from fully engaging with academics and the school community.¹⁸ With this denial of educational opportunities, many women and girls have not had a chance to learn about their rights or develop social capabilities.¹⁹

Most women and girls who have an intellectual disability are not provided with sufficient or accurate sexual education due to the stereotype that they are not sexually active.²⁰ This can result in unfamiliarity with sexual behavior, a lack of awareness of their right to refuse or withdraw consent, and a lack of personal safety skills.²¹

Women with intellectual disabilities who have been abused or trafficked may also lack awareness and knowledge of services that might help them.^{22,23} Without knowing who to contact to report abuse, they may seek assistance from friends and family who may not be able to provide adequate support. As a result, it is estimated that the majority of abuse and trafficking of women and girls with intellectual disabilities goes unreported.²⁴

F. How is violence and abuse facilitated?


Violence and abuse can occur in person (e.g., in homes, group homes, schools, workplaces, on public transportation, etc.)²⁵ or remotely through technology.²⁶ While almost anyone can use technology to exercise control over women and girls, many are targeted by known perpetrators who may have physical access to their devices, or to knowledge that enables access to digital accounts.²⁷ Types of technology-facilitated violence includes image-based threats (i.e., threatening to share intimate images), unsolicited communications, misuse and unauthorized access of accounts, remote monitoring, and controlling of home technology.²⁸

G. Reducing violence, abuse and human trafficking against women and girls with intellectual disabilities

This is a complex issue that requires a cohesive intersectional and intersectoral policy approach. Currently, there tends to be limited coordination and dialogue between the disability sector, the domestic and family violence sector, and the justice system. This makes the support-seeking process complex to navigate, especially where income and communication barriers are at play.²⁹

When creating and reforming policy and programs, the voices of women and girls with intellectual disabilities must be central. Women with intellectual disabilities have stressed the need for the provision of appropriate sexual education programs, including the safe use of technology. Sex education must be available for all women and girls with intellectual disabilities in accessible formats, including how-to videos, visual guides, and tipsheets.³⁰

Women have also stressed the need to build decision-making capacity, and to shift away from a reliance on substitute decision-making. Increasing decisional capacity, including financial literacy, builds women and girls' ability to make informed decisions for themselves, rather than relying on substitute decision-makers who may come and go.³¹



Financial capacity, control, and adequacy are also central to building the power and resilience of women and girls, and to preventing abuse and trafficking. This includes sufficient incomes, direct funding for services, and access to affordable community-based housing, which increase autonomy and control while reducing isolation and dependence.³²

Alongside changes to decision-making, income security, and housing, disempowering and paternalistic language that positions people with disabilities as ‘forever children’ must be removed from policy and program documents. This type of language aligns with negative attitudes and stereotypes that are all-too-common among professionals in the criminal justice system.³³ Additionally, increased training is needed for justice stakeholders.

This is by no means a complete list of necessary policy and program changes. The disempowerment of women and girls with intellectual disabilities begins early in life, continues through the education system, and is multiplied through various systems in adulthood. The issue must be brought to the surface and addressed in a wide-ranging way if abuse and trafficking is to be substantially reduced.

NOTES

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³ Rajan, D. (2011). *Women with Disabilities and Abuse: Access to Supports—Report on the pan-Canadian Focus Groups*. DAWN-RAFH CANADA. https://canadianwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PDF-VP-Resource-DAWN-RAFH-Canada-Focus-Groups-WWD_201.pdf.

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⁵ Harris, B., & Woodlock, D. (2021). 'For my safety': Experiences of technology-facilitated abuse among women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability. Queensland University of Technology. https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-09/TFA%20WWICD_accessible.pdf.

⁶ Boux, H. J. (2022). "#UsToo": Empowerment and Protectionism in Responses to Sexual Abuse of Women with Intellectual Disabilities. *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*, 37(1), 131–167.

⁷ Reid, J. A. (2018). Sex Trafficking of Girls With Intellectual Disabilities: An Exploratory Mixed Methods Study. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 30(2), 107–131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063216630981>.

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¹¹ Harris, B., & Woodlock, D. (2021). 'For my safety': Experiences of technology-facilitated abuse among women with intellectual disability or cognitive disability. Queensland University of

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²⁸ Harris, B., & Woodlock, D. (2021).

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