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GUIDE ON VIOLENCE AND DISABLED WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Disability is a topic of social relevance, we know that the number people affected grows day to day. It is estimated that 10% of European population suffers some type of disability but – regardless of this important rate – this group of people is treated in many aspects as a collective of invisible citizens.

In the case of women, the situation of "invisibility" is even greater, though there are approximately 250 million women in the world with some type of disability.

It is a fact, broadly recognised in reports from various institutions, that women are more vulnerable to abuse and maltreatment than men; in Spain as well as in other countries of the European Union the rate is that 40% of the female population suffers maltreatment,

In the same direction, we can find data that show how disabled people receive a larger number of abuses than non-disabled (the ratio is from two to five times more).

The confluence of all these factors in disabled women, especially in those who have severe deficiencies, learning or communication difficulties, turns them into a group with an extremely high risk of suffering some type of violence. The percentages of maltreatment exceed those of non-disabled women.

We have become more and more conscious of the fact that everyday actions, such as neglecting our body, involuntary sterilisation, denial of the right to motherhood, poorer professional qualification, lack of basic education, physical and sexual abuse... are acts of violence, that question and seriously harm fundamental rights.

Bearing these circumstances in mind, we have developed this guide which will be presented in the following pages; its' overall aim is to

call attention on a topic which is becoming a priority, within associations of disabled as well as in society in general and in political circles.

WHO IS THIS GUIDE ADDRESSED TO?

Main addressees

*The target group of this Guide are disabled women. In order to help them to see themselves as subjects with full rights and to identify the maltreatment they may suffer. With the intention that these acts will become "visible" and therefore they will be able to report them to the nearest institution or person in charge of receiving and/or going through the procedures.

*Associations that represent this sector of society so that they can plan activities and programmes to spread information and make society conscious about this problem.

*Professionals of this field, who deal with victims of violence and other disabled people, as a tool to deepen their knowledge of this specific problem.

With this intention, we want to highlight practical considerations and recommendations that might be helpful to both disabled women as well as to the professionals of this field, when facing violent situations.

WHAT DO WE UNDERSTAND BY VIOLENCE?

To be able to understand the special characteristics that often surround cases of violent attacks against disabled women, and to establish the frame in which this guide wants to base its' contents, we should make a reference to the messages issued by various entities and organisations concerning this social problem.

It is important to remember the statements pronounced by the United Nations in relation with Universal Rights, with the intention to prove how violent attacks against disabled women are a transgression of the principles gathered in these statements.

In 1975, this international organisation tried to draw people's attention on how serious gender violence is, in fact, the UN declared it as a clear attack against women's rights. Further in 1993, the General Assembly of the UN approved the Declaration concerning the *Elimination of Violence Against Women*, where it was clearly stated as a violation of Human Rights.

The UN define violence against women as:

*"any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."*¹

Other references made later support the idea of considering violence not only as an act of physical aggression, but also of psychological and sexual damage.

In the Resolution of the Commission of Human Rights *"The elimination of violence against women"* (1997 /44) the particular vulnerability to violence of female minority groups is highlighted.

¹ UN, Art. 1 "Declaration concerning the Elimination of Violence Against Women" Resolution 48/104 20, Dec., 1993

This Resolution states that some groups of women who belong to social minorities, refugees, and natives, (...) disabled women (...) are especially vulnerable to violence

Adding that it is necessary:

"To guarantee (from behaviour of the governments) the access of disabled women to information and services within the area of violence against women."

In the UN *Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* (General Assembly of the UN, 1993), *Rule number 9. - Family life and individual integrity*, says

"Persons with disabilities and their families need to be fully informed about taking precautions against sexual and other forms of abuse. Persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse in the family, community or institutions and need to be educated on how to avoid the occurrence of abuse, recognise when abuse has occurred and report on such acts."

In the same document, *Rule number 15.2* insists on:

"Legislative action may be needed to remove conditions that may adversely affect the lives of persons with disabilities, including harassment and victimisation."

Apparently, there is an international recognition of the situation, and public institutions and society in general are urged to take an active role towards the prevention and elimination of violence.

On the other hand, associations of disabled people are also pointing out its' importance. The *"Manifesto of Disabled Women in Europe"* (European Disability Forum, 1998) states the existence of violence against disabled women:

(...)"Violence against disabled girls and women is a major problem and statistics show that disabled girls and women are more likely to be victims of violence because of their vulnerability."

This is a document of reference for the construction of general policies and it gathers a number of principles and proposals including the elimination of all types of violence.

" 7. Violence, sexual abuse and security.

7.1 The right of disabled girls and women to be free of violence should be fully recognised. Violence against disabled girls and women is a major problem and statistics show that disabled girls and women are more likely to be victims of violence because of their vulnerability. Control of their own body should be guaranteed for disabled women to protect them against physical and sexual violence. This is very important particularly for disabled women who have to stay in hospitals, rehabilitation and other institutions And also for those who cannot represent themselves."

This guide is aimed to point out that discrimination due to physical or intellectual capacity of a person is an act of violence in itself. Thus, it generates frustration and violence in the person that suffers it. If we then add to this gender discrimination, we are contributing to raise the level of aggression and violence against handicapped women.

VIOLENCE, WOMEN AND DISABILITY

The idea of writing a guide concerning violence and disabled women arose as a consequence of a number of changes that are taking place in these fields. The concept and the practise of violence against disabled women is migrating from reduced concepts that limited violence within private grounds, to considering it a social problem and an attack to human dignity. At the same time, we, disabled women, feel the need to speak up for ourselves and state a number of circumstances that are part of our lives and which we consider within the scope of "*violence*" and "*a violation of human rights*".

Thanks to this growing feeling of self-confidence and to the desire to communicate; to the experience gained day to day by the associations of disabled people; plus a greater social and political support , a problem is becoming more obvious: there is a major risk of suffering violence and abuse being a woman and a disabled person.

Thus, at the same time, the lack of reports, complaints, data and studies related with the topic, makes us believe that there is some kind of lagoon or lack of information, which is to the detriment of the victims themselves, and to the professionals that cover this service.

There is an important lack of data to quantify and appreciate the repercussion of this problem. Much work needs to be done, and it is difficult to make a feasible approach to the situation in order to help in the design of intervention mechanisms capable of preventing and offering solutions.

This lack is due possibly to a wide range of factors such as:

- The concept of maltreatment varies from one definition to the other.

- The number of claims is very poor.

- The difficulty to identify as maltreatment some situations considered as physical abandoning or psychological cruelty

The lack of credibility, given to a woman with learning or communication difficulties.

Society has moral difficulties to admit that a disabled woman has been object of violence or abuse.

Methodological divergences when the cause and consequences of violence against disabled women are analysed.

WHAT MAKES DISABLED WOMEN MORE VULNERABLE TO VIOLENCE?

This major exposure to suffer situations of violence, possibly comes from attitudes and considerations towards women emerged in a masculine society, added to certain conditions due to disability itself, such as:

The fact of being less capable of self defence (physical).
Greater difficulties to report maltreatment due to difficulties in communicating.

Difficulties in access to information and counselling places due mainly to architectural and communication barriers.

Due to a lower self-esteem and disregard of their image as women. The contradiction between, the assignment of traditional roles to women; with the lack of opportunities to these roles for disabled women.

A greater amount of dependence from other people's care.

Fear of reporting the abuse, as it might cause the loss of links and care.

Less credibility when reporting these attacks in certain institutions.

Having to live in environments that favour violence: non-functional families, institutions, residences and hospitals.

But, above all these circumstances that lead to ignorance and disregard of the situation, is the fact of discrimination and a heavy social prejudice towards disabled women.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE

The following classification of different types of violence is based on declarations made within the frame of respect to human rights and non-violence. Starting from these definitions, we believe that a wider approximation to the different situations of violence and abuse that disabled women are liable to suffer is possible.

When trying to classify the different shapes that violence against women can adopt, we must bear in mind two types of violence: "*active violence*" when the person that commits the aggression participates actively, and "*passive violence*" when an action is left undone (omitted). Furthermore there are signs that can indicate evidence of possible situations of violence.

ACTIVE VIOLENCE

The epicentre of active violence is in carrying out the abuse on the victim. This category is formed by other categories such as:

physical abuse
emotional
sexual or economical abuse

PASIVE VIOLENCE

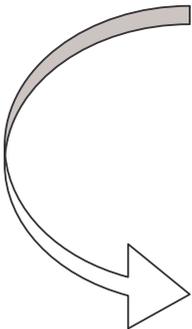
In the category of "passive violence" we find:

physical neglect
emotional neglect

ACTIVE VIOLENCE

The following is a brief description of the different kinds of active violence that can be performed against disabled women in their habitual environment, as well as the way they are usually practised.

- Physical abuse:



Any direct or indirect action that can damage the life, welfare or health of disabled women, provoking pain, unnecessary suffering or health deficiency.



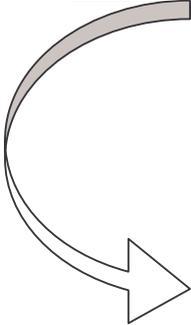
Aggressions in different parts of the body
Unjustified administration of drugs.
Restrictions of mobility.



To be found in sedative or nervous conditions.
Motor dysfunction not due to their disability.
Signs of physical violence: marks in wrists and ankles, fractures, bites, internal damages, burns, etc
Detriment in their remains of physical capacity.

ACTIVE VIOLENCE

Emotional abuse:



Behaviour model that results from damage to the welfare and emotional balance of a disabled woman.



Isolation, prohibiting or limiting the access to means of communication (phone, mail..), to information and to keep in contact with other relatives and neighbours.

Oral cruelty, by means of insults, constant criticism, making fun of their body, punishments in the presence of others.

Over protection.

Speaking, deciding or giving opinions in her name.

Intimidation, and /or emotional blackmail.



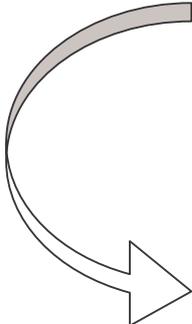
Depression.

Communication and interrelation difficulties.

Insecurity, and low self-esteem.

ACTIVE VIOLENCE

Sexual abuse:



Actions that are a sexual aggression towards disabled women, and can produce physical or emotional harm.



Rape.
Sexual vexation or
humiliation.



Marks or/and injuries in genitals.
Fear to relate with certain people.
Undesired pregnancies.
Venereal diseases.

ACTIVE VIOLENCE

Economical abuse:

Actions that pursue the loss of control and rights on properties, money or family shared inheritances. The use of the image of a disabled woman against her will, to gain money for third persons, is also considered economic abuse.



The use of disabled girls or women in mendacity.
Employing disabled women in poorly paid jobs usually linked to clandestine employment.
Limiting the access to information and management of personal economy.
The use of money as a sanction.
The family denies the access to external economic resources (jobs, grants..).



Depending too much on others.
Little expectations regarding herself and her personal or professional projection.

PASIVE VIOLENCE

The expression "*passive violence*" refers to those actions that by being left undone or by refusing to do them can provoke physical or psychological harm.

Physical neglect:

It is understood as such, the denial or privation of the basic aspects to keep the body in good shape, in relation with health, hygiene and image.



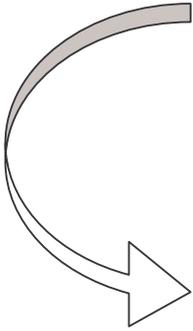
Negligence in feeding.
Personal carelessness.
Neglecting hygienic measures.
Lack of supervision.



Malnutrition.
Frequent illnesses not caused by disability
Inadequate cloths regarding sex, climate, and the persons' handicaps.
Dirty clothes.
Long periods of time without supervision.
Physical problems worsen due to lack of treatment.

PASIVE VIOLENCE

Emotional neglect:



Those actions that deny or deprive attention, consideration and respect towards disabled women.



Ignoring their existence
Giving no value to their opinion.
Feeling ashamed about them.



Lack of interaction.
No motivation concerning their personal development.
Scarce or no participation in family or social activities.

It is important to point out that in most cases, the conditions given by their own disability make it difficult to report the violent attack by the victims themselves. So may the associations of people with disabilities, professionals and society in general, be the echo of this problem and also give the voice of alarm about these violent practises against these women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This guide wishes to contribute positively by highlighting the following recommendations which will contribute to reach a greater comprehension and approximation, from a professional and associative view as well as political, to an ignored social problem; that of violence against disabled women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Promoting debates and information campaigns on this specific problem, in order to find common approaches.
- By establishing channels of information, consulting , reporting and claiming more accessible and nearer.
- By spreading the information in different ways to make it accessible to people with learning or sensory difficulties.
- By breaking the architectural barriers to information and counselling centres, in order to make them accessible to the victims of violence.
- Further research of the reasons of the violence practised against disabled women, in order to be able to fight it more efficiently.
- By encouraging the implication of professionals of the field, to look for intervention methods.
- By orientating the responsibility of parents, partners nurses.... towards personal attention, offering the basic care in which their help is required.
- By encouraging the use of technical aids that allow a greater independence and /or by improving the attention given by others. And to concentrate on the abilities that lead to independence.

- Training the family and the personal assistants in terms of specific ways of dealing with different disabilities.
- By encouraging communication.
- Education of disabled women in frames of self-respect.
- Information about their rights.
- Training disabled women to control and organise efficiently the support services.
- By supporting a culture of respect to the dignity, difference, diversity, and equality between sexes.

Recognition of the actions that trespass the Legal boundaries as violent acts, i.e. those that refer to the violation of rights that go against human integrity.

Home Page in Internet:

[http:// **www.asoc-ies.org**](http://www.asoc-ies.org)

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Special thanks to Anne Pridmore for her contribution to the English proof reading.

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Author: Asociación Iniciativas y Estudios Sociales
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Year: 1998

This guide was elaborated by the Association "INITIATIVES AND SOCIAL STUDIES "(I.E.S) as part of the actions developed within the frame of the METIS project. This project was carried out under the shelter of the DAPHNE Initiative of the European Commission (1997 – 1998).



With the support and funding of the European Commission



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