Making the Links: disabled women and domestic violence

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Aims

- Further understanding of the needs of disabled women experiencing domestic violence
- Scope of existing provision and what is needed
- Gaps in provision
- Examples of good practice and policy
- Recommendations for policy and service development

Underpinnings

- Social model of understanding disability
- Women's Aid definition of domestic violence
- Women with physical and sensory impairments exp abuse from ex/partners, family members or PAs

Methodology

- Stage 1
  - Focus group; key professional interviews; email/tel. consultation; consultation with DV and disability organsiations; 2 national surveys; literature review
- Stage 2
  - 30 in-depth interviews; case study interviews; interviews with individuals experts on practice issues; interviews with strategic/commissioning managers and disability consultants.

What we know

- Gap in research, policy & service development
- Barriers identified – lack of accessible services, low take-up of DV provision, tiny numbers disclosing to disability orgs, absence of awareness campaigns
- Issues of increased power & control
- Greater need for services–far less provision

Women interviewed

- 30 women aged 20-70 years
- Range of physical and sensory impairments
- 20 White British, 1 White Irish, 9 BME
- 19 with children
- Largest group living in adapted council accommodation

Women’s abuse experiences

- Varied and multiple abusers
- 1 - 22 years
- Wide range of abuse
- Women’s impairments used in the abuse and high levels of degrading emotional abuse
- Pervasive ‘non-stop- abuse
- Extreme sexual violence

Questioning prevailing definitions

I think that the domestic violence thing in a way kind of misleads disabled women because you always think of a man and a woman married or in a partnership. He hits her. But actually it's far more complex than that…it's big, it's so big and I think it's uncomfortable for non-disabled people to face up to.

When abuser is carer: neglect, isolation and intense vulnerability

At night times, he'd be in the living room and I'd be in my bedroom and he'd shut the door on me so I couldn't call him for anything, so he wouldn't hear me. And if I wanted to like use the toilet or anything he'd tell me to just piss myself there and then…..

Once he threw me on the floor with my dinner and said 'that's where you eat your dinner, that's where you belong'.

When abuser is carer: neglect, isolation and intense vulnerability…

He was drinking and getting worse and worse, I had a motability car, he would take it and disappear for days on end with it, leaving me stranded in the house, unable to get the shopping etc. But you don’t say anything as a disabled woman, I felt so ashamed that this was happening, so I didn’t tell anyone, didn’t ask anyone for help. I’d just be stranded….

Financial abuse by abusers who are carers

- Taking control over women's finances
- Using women's money to fund alcohol/drug dependency
- Women denied money for their prescriptions and other essentials related to impairment
- Getting rid of woman because she could no longer work

Not believed and meant to be grateful

- Dominant view of disabled women and intimate relationships

  People pity him because he is taking care of you and so noble. So people are reluctant to criticise this saint or to think he could be doing these terrible things. And possibly as well as that there's a sort of I think an idea … people don't really 'see' disabled women. And people don't easily see a disabled woman as a wife, partner, and mother. So I think for some people it's hard to think well this might be a woman who's being sexually or physically abused by her partner,… because disabled women don't have sex, do they?

Reinforcing control and dependency

Because they become your carer and they make you believe that you need them because of your disability. And they do everything. 'And I'm making life so much easier for you'. You know and I thought it was wonderful. Nobody had taken care of me in that way. No one. You know, and it was like, god, he'll do the ironing. He'll cook. He'll clean. And bit by bit though he was taking everything. He was buying my clothes. He was telling me who I could see. Where I could go. I mean part of that is about being a woman, but a lot of it was being disabled…. He always made a thing about not pushing me out in my wheelchair. He'd carry me out to the car. Just to emphasise it more.

Abuse by Paid Carers

Well, I have been stolen from and abused by my care workers and then there was a huge argument with social services and the housing people because they refuse to believe it or even investigate it. They were just on the care worker's side and got all serious and judgemental if I started to try to tell them about it.

Responding to the abuse

- Being disabled made abuse worse & ltd capacity to get away
- Issues for women with ‘no recourse’
- Women don’t tell – ashamed, self blame
- Abuse preferable to ‘a life of care agencies’ = stay in abuse for many years

Triggers to leaving/separating

- Feeling they had had enough
- Fear they would be fatally harmed
- Escalation of abuse
- Involvement of children
- Reason for staying longer – nowhere to go, absence of services, abuser's threats of suicide
- Factors helping to leave – access to supportive org, someone to assist them, more confidence, kids

Aftermath….

- Post-separation violence: 6 months – 4 yrs
- Impact on self – severe depression, losing sense of self, feeling worthless, eating disorders, sleeping problems
- Impact on children – ongoing
  - impairment used by professional agencies
  - child contact

Women's help-seeking

- Many never sought formal or informal help for range of personal reasons
- Other barriers – physical accessibility, lack of information, racism and feeling 'doubly different', 'no recourse', not being believed
- Formal support – needs rarely met; 80% said police and SS's unhelpful
- Informal help equally helpful & unhelpful

Advice to other disabled abused women

- Emphasised importance of telling someone / speaking out
- Naming abuse important step for disabled women
- Believe they do not deserve abuse

What did the surveys reveal?

- 342 to DV services – 133 responses – almost 40%.
- Using WA Census Day figures from 2006, disabled women comprised 7% of those using DV services
- DV organisations - services patchy or minimal & lack of resources big issue
- Awareness of disability issues impacted on attitudes and on whether disabled women were likely to feel comfortable or welcomed
- Training and resources a big issue

What did the surveys reveal?

- 348; 126 (39%) responses – 53 stated ‘we do no work’, thus substantive responses from 73 – 23% response rate
- Disability orgs. rarely saw it as their issue or provided specific support services
- Ltd resources made it hard to address DV
- Recognised improved awareness of DV, building links with existing DV services, and resources to recruit dedicated staff were needed

Need for ‘sea change’

- Need for a ‘sea change’ or ‘cultural shift’ in attitudes to disability
- Lack of resources a major issue for both sectors
- Despite best intentions, responses to disabled abused women are patchy and inadequate
- Clear evidence for the need for more accessible refuge and outreach services

In Sum…

- Disabled women experience
  - A greater need for services, coupled with
  - Far less provision

  and lose out on both counts

- Study developed a range of recommendations

Recommendations

- Comprehensive services in all sectors through the allocation of dedicated resources
- More fully accessible refuge accommodation - services coupled with publicity exercise reaching out to disabled women
- Training and awareness in all relevant sectors
- Interaction between disabled and non-disabled women & involvement of disabled women in all policy/service developments

Recommendations…

- Both sectors learning from each other - DV policies & disability policies with dedicated workers where possible
- Social care departments & relevant statutory bodes developing policies on portable community care packages
- Needs of abused disabled women integrated into all relevant strategic and commissioning frameworks