



“BRING ME MY SCOOTER SO I CAN LEAVE YOU”

The shocking reality of disabled women who experience abuse at the hands of their carers

Alarming statistics show that more than 50% of disabled women experience domestic abuse in their lifetime.

Women who have a disability are twice as likely to experience domestic abuse, and are up to five times more likely to be subjected to sexual violence.

Women with a physical, mental, sensory or intellectual impairment or a health condition that affects their daily lives can experience prolonged and severe domestic abuse from a wide range of perpetrators.

For women who are severely disabled, abuse can be lifelong. Studies have shown that domestic abuse can start after the onset of a disability.

By its very nature, the prevalence of domestic abuse is difficult to measure. But because disabled women are typically excluded from domestic abuse studies, it is highly likely that the figures are vastly underestimated.

Dr Jenna Breckenridge, Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, says studies have shown that disablist attitudes judge women to be abnormal, weak and a burden on society. And the more you're told you are a burden, the more likely you are to believe it and somehow feel that the abuse is deserved.

Those same prejudices, she maintains, often portray disabled women as being 'asexual' and unlikely to have intimate relationships.

Studies have shown that girls and young women who have a disability have less access to sex education, and there is a notion that they do not understand. Jenna Breckenridge said: "Young disabled women might not have the same opportunity to go to parties, 'snog' boys and be in an informal learning environment.

"Health impairments that require assistance with personal care can be desexualising. Those women are used to having people help with toileting, ↘

washing and dressing, so they are used to being naked around other people – which means they do not have the same sense of what is private and what is not. This increases the opportunity for people who are doing the care to be abusive.”

A result is that perpetrators might seek out disabled women as partners because they perceive them to be helpless, easy to control, confuse and manipulate and unable to think or do for themselves.

The perpetrator is likely to be a woman's main carer. And because they provide assistance with mobility, personal care, activities of daily living, transportation and finance, it makes it especially difficult for her to flee an abusive relationship.

Occupational therapist Dr Breckenridge highlights a relationship between a non-disabled person and a disabled person. In a scenario which has acquired the distasteful tag a 'Florence Nightingale partnership,' the non-disabled person is perceived to be a 'saint who takes on' a person with a disability - not because they love them, but because they are seemingly altruistic. Abusive partners who fulfil a caring role are less likely to be suspected, and research shows that disabled women are often disbelieved when they muster the courage to disclose abuse.

Jenna Breckenridge says abused disabled women are reluctant to report abusive behaviour to health professionals or police during pregnancy for fear that they will be judged unfit mothers.

She said: "In addition to physical, sexual, psychological and economic forms of abuse, disabled women experience a distinct form of abuse that specifically targets their impairments. This form of abuse purposefully disables women further as they face double disadvantage."

Shocking, real-life examples of abusive partners taking advantage of a person's limitations include:

- Shifting furniture or removing a non-slip bath mat so that a woman with a visual impairment will trip and possibly injure herself
- Making fun of a woman's learning disabilities
- Demanding sexual favours in return for helping with personal care
- Being rough or aggressive and placing a person in a degrading and uncomfortable physical position

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- Filming a visually-impaired person while they are showering or bathing
- Removing the batteries from power wheelchairs
- Sabotaging communication devices and assistive technology
- Over or under-administering medication
- Deliberately confusing women with cognitive impairments
- Creating a social isolation situation to reduce the risk of abuse being uncovered
- Cruelty, neglect and abuse of assistance animals.

Because disabled women often receive support and assistance for daily living from various of sources, there's a greater risk of them being exposed to a wide range of possible perpetrators. Conversely, greater interaction increases the likelihood that signs of abuse will be detected.

Yet, despite having greater need for support services, it has been shown that disabled women are less likely to receive adequate access to specialist domestic abuse support from agencies across health, social care and the third sector.

Although the Disability Discrimination Act means that services are required to make reasonable adjustments, some charities and buildings are exempt from these rules, making it difficult for women with mobility issues to access refuge accommodation.

Even where there is physical access, some refuges cannot accommodate assistance animals or additional carers. Basic care needs are often a key concern for women leaving an abusive partner, especially when he is her main carer. It's also known that women with learning disabilities are often not familiar with the term refuge and lack understanding about available support.

In most cases, the thoughts and feelings of women trapped in abusive relationships are left unsaid.

One of the women who took part in a recent study shared the one thing she longed to utter to her abusive partner, but didn't have the courage:

“Bring me my scooter so I can leave you.”
www.womensaid.org.uk

Dial **0808 2000 247** for a 24-hour national domestic violence helpline run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge ■

CASE STUDY

Jessie, who is deaf, was suicidal, depressed and self-harming. Her ex-partner was abusing her and Jessie felt she couldn't escape. She has been working with Young DeafHope Here, Jessie explains her story.

“When I first met a worker from Young DeafHope I had been in an abusive relationship, and was still being abused by my ex. I had also been hiding from my family for a few years.

In 18 months, I had moved 13 times trying to stay safe. I was in a bad way, suicidal, very depressed, self-harming and not eating. I was very ill.

My ex had abused me in many ways, physically, sexually, financially, harassment, blackmail, emotional and psychological abuse. They controlled everything I did. I lost all confidence and self-belief, and had no energy to leave.

Young DeafHope found me a safe refuge where I stayed for several months. I found this really hard, often becoming suicidal and I turned to drink to try to block out my bad memories. This led me to being thrown out of the refuge, but Young DeafHope helped me to find new accommodation.

With Young DeafHope support, I was able to get help for my depression and drinking and learn new coping strategies to prevent myself from negative thinking. Last year I was reunited with my family thanks to Young DeafHope support. I go to the gym to help cope with stress and have stopped drinking. My panic attacks are getting less.

Young DeafHope have helped me become assertive and confident and back in control of my life. I have now completed my first full year at college and feel really proud of myself. For the first time in seven years, I feel I have a future. I still have a way to go but I know I will be able to cope, and I know I can call YDH any time I need advice. I would recommend Young DeafHope to any young deaf person who is having problems with relationships.”

• Young DeafHope is a unique project working with young deaf people to raise awareness of abuse and domestic violence. They give young people the knowledge, skills and confidence to develop healthy relationships and to be safe.
Signhealth.org.uk