

Strong and safe communities – effective interventions for adult victims of sexual violence

Report on workshop for stakeholders with disabilities

Background

- 1 With the support of the Disabled People's Assembly (DPA), the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA) held a workshop in Wellington on 18 October 2007 for stakeholders representing people with disabilities to discuss our sexual violence research project.

Purpose and format of the workshop

- 2 The purpose of the workshop was to outline the project's scope and aims and to hear the views of representatives of people with disabilities. The agenda is attached at Appendix A. Eleven women from non-government organisations (NGOs) participated, among them representatives from the Disabled Peoples Assembly (DPA), Intellectually Handicapped Children (IHC) and CCS Disability Action. A list of participating organisations is attached at Appendix B.
- 3 After a round of introductions the Research Manager, Dr Denise Lievore, gave a presentation on the prevalence and nature of sexual violence against adults in New Zealand. The presentation focused on what we know about sexual victimisation of people with disabilities and provided an overview of the project's objectives and approach.
- 4 In the subsequent discussion the participants voiced their concerns about the exclusion and invisibility of people with disabilities in research and other domains. The key themes of the discussion centred on:
 - communication and attitudes
 - access to services
 - gatekeepers and dependency
 - conducting the research.

Summary of key themes

Communication and attitudes

- 5 Participants perceived that misunderstanding of disability issues in the community creates an artificial divide between physical and mental disabilities. This can hinder communication, but also creates a silo system in terms of responses to people with disabilities.
- 6 People with disabilities struggle with attitudes among the general public on an everyday basis. According to the participants, attitudinal barriers permeate disability services to the same extent as elsewhere. However, as victims of sexual violence, people with disabilities face a disproportionate disadvantage at the point of disclosure: they are less likely to be believed and often perceived as asexual.
- 7 Furthermore, communication difficulties can be a barrier to help-seeking for blind, deaf or intellectually disabled women who are victims of sexual violence. 'Acting out' may be a means of communication for those who feel they cannot be heard otherwise, although it may be misunderstood by carers, family and friends.

Access to services

- 8 Many people with disabilities do not understand their rights, including the right to seek and receive help. The participants strongly advocated dissemination of information on human rights for people with disabilities and for women and men in general.
- 9 People with disabilities have few options in terms of where to seek help. This may be due to location (e.g. living in rural areas), and/or to the disability. For example, a refuge may not be a viable option for a blind person who is unable to live in an unfamiliar environment. To their knowledge, there are no sexual violence counselling services appropriate for people with disabilities.
- 10 One of the crucial issues in terms of service options seems to be funding. Participants reported that some sexual assault service providers do not provide services for disabled people on the grounds that they do not have adequate funding. This was perceived to be an attitudinal problem rather than a fact. There was a perception that sexual assault services often regarded the provision of appropriate and accessible services for people with disabilities as a problem and an additional burden. The view was expressed that services should be available for all who need them: they should not only be accessible for people with disabilities, but also welcoming.
- 11 This limited access to support systems was a key factor that led to the establishment of the Disability Coalition Against Violence, which consists of DPA and the National Network for Stopping Violence Services. The National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges (NCIWR) are happy to work with the Coalition. Both NCIWR and the National Network - Ending Sexual

Violence Together (NNEST) have been invited to have a disabled member of their organisation represent them at Coalition meetings.

- 12 Problems around access to services are often compounded by a lack of training on sexual violence within disability services. There was anecdotal evidence that in some instances where sexual violence is known to occur, a lack of action allows it to continue. Staff in some organisations protect each other rather than their clients.
- 13 During engagement with the criminal justice system, people with disabilities often feel undermined as witnesses. The participants argued that an advocate or support person is needed to help victims make complaints and to support them throughout the process.

Gatekeepers and dependence

- 14 People with disabilities are often dependent on family, friends and support workers. They are more vulnerable to abuse from people who also act as gatekeepers. As a consequence, some people live in unsafe conditions every day but cannot seek help. The following points are salient here.
 - Some people are punished by caregivers if they do not comply with demands or rules.
 - Older women stay in violent relationships because they do not have anywhere else to go.
 - Many women are unable to access services on their own. It can be difficult to penetrate families where victims of sexual violence are isolated from helping services.
 - Sexual violence often co-occurs with other forms of domestic violence for people with disabilities. However, the definition of household in the Domestic Violence Act excludes the types of homes in which people with disabilities commonly live, due to the presence of paid carers. Under current legislation, these homes are defined as workplaces and the relationship between the carer and the person with a disability is not regarded as a domestic relationship.
 - In some instances, speaking out about sexually violent staff or carers can present a different type of risk, as the service might be the only one available.

Conducting the research

- 15 The participants emphasised that the research project presented a huge investment for their community, although some expressed doubts as to whether it would make a difference for them. In part, this was due to scepticism about the impact of reports published by government agencies.

- 16 The participants recommended that the research be conducted within a human rights framework, which would encourage collaboration and communication with people with disabilities.
- 17 The participants advised against pre-determining the types of disabilities to be included in the research. Attempting to limit the study to physical and intellectual disabilities could be construed as exclusionary. It is preferable to acknowledge the wide variety of impairments and their implications, rather than impose a definition for research purposes. Research participants should be allowed to self-identify as having a disability and to define their disability. Points raised here were that:
- Definitions of disability are not fixed. For example, the question was raised whether eating disorders, or alcohol and other addictions, can be regarded as disabilities.
 - Some but not all people define mental health problems as disabilities. This is particularly important in terms of sexual violence, as mental health problems may precede or be a consequence of sexual violence.
 - At age 45, one in three people with disabilities suffer from multiple impairments.
 - Many people have multiple points of identification and it is important to be aware that the first point of identification may differ. For example, a Māori person with a disability may identify primarily as Māori and prefer to speak to a Māori researcher.
- 18 A number of points were raised in relation to research process and methodology.
- Credibility was regarded as the most important criterion for selecting researchers.
 - Researchers could work with disability support sources, which are already trusted by and working with the disabled community, to engage research participants.
 - A budget for sign language interpreters would be required for interviews with deaf participants.
 - Research among people with disabilities often requires longer timelines.
 - Accessibility of information was deemed vital (e.g. accessible and readable documents).
 - It is important to include the perspective of Māori people with disabilities. This could be achieved by working with organisations such as Ngāti Kapau, a consumer group for blind Māori, or Ngāti Ture, a Māori Deaf Consumer group.

Other concerns

- 19 In discussing a Treasury report on the economic costs of violence,¹ the participants observed that the estimated cost of sexual violence is likely to be very conservative, as the report was unlikely to have taken into consideration those who are unable to speak for themselves or seek help. They noted that the social impact of sexual violence is more significant for people with disabilities due to the effect of already devalued lives.
- 20 There were some concerns about how a potential change of government could affect the research project. MWA assured the participants that funding is secured for the life of the project. The participants stated that they would welcome cross-party support for the project.
- 21 A final concern centred around the Taskforce for Action on Sexual Violence (TASV). There was a strong feeling among participants that women with disabilities should be represented on the TASV. MWA noted that the NGO representative on the TASV – the National Network: Ending Sexual Violence Together – is a new and growing network representing over 80 organisation and individuals nationwide. There was also some concern about overlaps between and/or the separation of the TASV and the Taskforce for Action on Violence in Families (TAVF).

¹ Tim Roper & Andrew Thompson (2006) *Estimating the costs of crime in New Zealand in 2003/04*, New Zealand Treasury Working Paper 06/04, New Zealand Treasury, Wellington.

Agenda

Stakeholder workshop on sexual violence against adults with physical and intellectual disabilities

Thursday 18 October 2007

Agenda

Objectives

The purpose of the workshop is to introduce the research project to organisations representing people with disabilities and to establish a sound platform for the research by gathering their ideas on key issues.

Time	Task
9.00 am	Greeting/karakia/mihi mihi (Sonya Rimene)
9.30 am	Effective interventions for adult victims of sexual violence research project (Denise Lievore)
Followed by discussion on the following potential topics:	
9.50 am - 11.40 am	Particular challenges and issues for adult victims of sexual violence who have disabilities Defining physical and intellectual disability
Morning tea	Issues related to institutions
10.30 am - 10.50 am	Support systems and help-seeking
	Accessibility and appropriateness of services and interventions
	Conducting the research
	Other issues
11.40	Wrap-up
12.00	Conclusion and karakia

Participants

Non-government organisations

Disabled Persons Assembly
National Network of Stopping Violence Services
Disability Consultant
People First
CCS Disability Action
Central Potential
Idea Services
IHC
Donald Beasley Institute

Government Agencies

Ministry of Women's Affairs
New Zealand Police
Office for Disability Issues

Apologies

Ministry of Health
Deaf Association of New Zealand