



**Call for Views: New Strategies - Domestic and Sexual Abuse
Strategy and Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy**

Written Response from Disability Action

“One in two disabled women are in an abusive relationship yet it is never mentioned. Disabled women earn 22% less than non-disabled men and it is never mentioned. We don't have a gender equality strategy, a disability strategy, a violence against women and girls' strategy or childcare provision. These are all issues that make the lives of disabled women harder”.

Disabled woman carer with long-term health condition, 25-29.

Disability Action is a Northern Ireland-based pan-disability organisation. We have worked with d/Deaf and disabled people, Disabled People's Organisations (DPO's), and Civic Society Organisations (CSOs) across the region in the development of this report. This report has been compiled by d/Deaf and disabled people.

Article 16 of the UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities requires that the Executive, Assembly and UK Government should take all appropriate measures to protect d/Deaf and disabled people, particularly women from all forms of abuse, violence, and exploitation¹. The UNCRPD Committee raised concerns, in its (2017) concluding observations, regarding the abuse, ill-treatment, sexual violence and exploitation of women, children, intersex persons, and elderly persons with disabilities. The Committee recommended the following actions to be undertaken in partnership with DPOs and in line with target 16.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals:

- Measures to ensure equal access to justice and to safeguard persons with disability from abuse, ill treatment, sexual violence, and exploitation;

¹ UN General Assembly (2007): [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: resolution/adopted by the General Assembly, 24 January 2007, A/RES/61/106 Article 16](#) (accessed 4 November 2021).

- Measures to ensure that all facilities and programmes are effectively monitored in line with article 16 (3) of the Convention².

d/Deaf and disabled women are of greater risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation than people who are not disabled³. We experience disproportionate levels of domestic violence and face barriers to accessing appropriate support⁴. Women's Aid Northern Ireland report that 41% of women in refuges and 41% of women accessing outreach services have a disability⁵. The UK has not ratified the Istanbul Convention⁶ which provides a legal framework to tackle numerous forms of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), including domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, female genital mutilation (FGM), so-called 'honour-based' violence, and forced marriage. It has been termed the 'gold

² Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017): [Concluding Observations on the Initial Report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#), UN: CRPD/C/GBR/CO/1, paragraph 38 (accessed 3 November 2021).

³ DfC (2020): [Disability Strategy and Expert Advisory Panel: Report and Recommendations](#), p.58 (accessed 10 October 2021).

⁴ DfC (2020): [Disability Strategy and Expert Advisory Panel: Report and Recommendations](#), pp.59-60 (accessed 10 October 2021).

⁵ Women's Aid Federation NI (2020): [Annual Report 2019-2020](#). (accessed 2 November 2021).

⁶ CUHRLS (2020): [Why hasn't the UK Government ratified the Istanbul Convention eight years after signing it?](#) (accessed 30 December 2021).

standard approach' to tackling these widespread instances of gender-based violence⁷.

d/Deaf and disabled women and girls are more likely to experience sexual violence than non-Disabled women and girls⁸. Evidence suggests that we are two times more likely to suffer physical abuse from an intimate partner than nondisabled women⁹ and that d/Deaf and disabled women who experience domestic abuse face compound oppressions¹⁰. The ongoing Covid-19 crisis has been connected to an increased risk of domestic violence against us¹¹.

⁷ UN Women (2013): [Comment made by then-UN Women Deputy Executive Director, Lakshmi Puri: The Istanbul Convention: strengthening the response to ending violence against women](#). (accessed 30 December 2021).

⁸ HM Government (2021). *The end-to-end rape review report on findings and actions*. CP 437, [online] June, p.4. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1001417/end-to-end-rape-review-report-with-correction-slip.pdf Accessed on: X

⁹ Slayter, E. (2009): Intimate partner violence against women with disabilities: implications for disability service case management practice, *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* 2009, 18: pp.182–199. doi:10.1080/10926770802675668 reference in Breckenridge et al. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 2014, 14:234. Available at <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2393/14/234> (accessed 30 October 2021).

¹⁰ Nixon, J. (2009): Domestic violence and women with disabilities: locating the issue on the periphery of social movements, *Disability and Society* 2009, 24:77–89.

¹¹ Hughes, K. et al (2012): Prevalence and risk of violence against adults with disabilities: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. Hughes, K. et al. *The Lancet*, 2012, Vol. 379. 30; Trevillion, K. et al. (2012): Experiences of domestic violence and mental disorders: a systematic review and meta-analysis.

A review by Public Health England in 2015¹² expressed a view that domestic violence against d/Deaf and disabled women was under-reported. Nonetheless, the report concluded that we experience disproportionately higher rates of domestic abuse¹³ and more frequent abuse over longer periods of time than non-d/Deaf and disabled people¹⁴. We may also experience domestic abuse in wider contexts and by greater numbers of significant others, including intimate partners, family members, personal care assistants and health care professionals. d/Deaf and disabled people also encounter differing dynamics of domestic abuse, which may include more severe coercion, control, or abuse from carers¹⁵. d/Deaf and disabled victims are more likely to report abuse from multiple perpetrators: one in five (19%) compared with one in twenty (6%) for non-disabled people.¹⁶ There is a lack of specialist services for d/Deaf and disabled people experiencing domestic violence and many services are inaccessible¹⁷. A BBC investigation in 2018 found that just one in ten domestic violence refuge spaces in the

¹² Public Health England (2015): [Disability and domestic abuse - Risk, impacts and response](#), p.7 (accessed 2 November 2021).

¹³ Ibid, p.4.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.4.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.4.

¹⁶ SafeLives (2017): [Disabled Survivors Too: Disabled people and domestic abuse](#), p.17 (accessed 2 November 2021).

¹⁷ DfC (2020): [Disability Strategy Expert Advisory Panel: Report and Recommendations](#), p.118 (accessed 10 October 2021).

UK is accessible to Disabled people with physical impairments¹⁸.

d/Deaf and disabled people who have communication challenges may experience barriers in accessing helpline support. Women with physical disabilities and who are parents of d/Deaf and disabled children may experience barriers in accessing appropriate refuge. This can mean that d/Deaf and disabled women remain in dangerous situations

Women participants in research conducted by Disability Action on behalf of the Equality Commission reported that they had experienced high levels of abuse¹⁹.

Case Study

A young woman with autism participating in the research provided a disturbing account of lifelong abuse and exploitation. This included being encouraged by a parent to take a dog for a walk with men who abused her. The young woman had nowhere to turn to for help or support. She reported the abuse and was not taken seriously by authorities. The content provided by the young woman in this case study was so disturbing that it has yet to be fully published due to the need to carefully plan and process.

¹⁸ BBC News (2018). Why disabled women can't access all refuges. *BBC.co.uk*, [online] 28 November. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46371441> Accessed on: X

¹⁹ Toman, N (2022) [Progress Towards the Implementation of the UNCRPD in Northern Ireland](#). (accessed 20 March 2022)

There does not appear to have been a specific focus on domestic violence against d/Deaf and disabled people in Northern Ireland²⁰.

Research undertaken on behalf of the Equality Commission NI (2014) on UNCRPD compliance in NI reported that the absence of comment from stakeholders on Article 16²¹ (UNCRPD Freedom from exploitation, violence, and abuse) issues is itself perhaps ‘a sign of a lack of government emphasis on what are difficult issues which many voluntary sector organisations are reluctant to engage’²². The report also indicated that, policies and programmes to deliver on Article 16 will need to have a clear basis in the particular experiences of violence, exploitation, and abuse of deaf and disabled people.

The potential for abuse can be greater within institutional settings as demonstrated by the launch of a Public Investigation into events at Muckamore Abbey Hospital²³ and the Older Person’s Commissioner’s

²⁰ Byrne B., Harper, C., Irvine R. S., Russell H. and Fitzpatrick B. (2014): [UNCRPD: Shortfalls in public policy and programme delivery in Northern Ireland relative to the Articles of the UNCRPD](#), p.100 (accessed 24 October 2021).

²¹ UN General Assembly (2007): [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: resolution/adopted by the General Assembly, 24 January 2007](#), A/RES/61/106 Article 16 (accessed 4 November 2021).

²² Ibid, p. 100.

²³ DoH (2020): [Muckamore Abbey Hospital - Public Inquiry](#) (accessed 2 November 2021).

report on Dunmurry Manor²⁴ both of which include evidence of violence against and the abuse of d/Deaf and disabled women.

Whilst there is no single source of evidence on violence, exploitation, and abuse of d/Deaf and disabled people within care systems in Northern Ireland²⁵, there is an Adult Safeguarding Policy in place for the health and social care sector. However, whilst the policy provides for protective interventions in the case of adults at risk of harm without the individual's consent²⁶. The Health Minister Robin Swann pledged to bring forward a new Adult Safeguarding Bill for Northern Ireland, to help protect care home residents and other vulnerable people²⁷.

d/Deaf and disabled people organisations have reported that the police and criminal justice system fails d/Deaf and disabled women reporting sex crimes.²⁸

²⁴ COPNI (2020): [Commissioner for Older People concludes his Home Truths investigation into Dunmurry Manor Care Home](#) (accessed 15 December 2021).

²⁵ DfC (2020): [Disability Strategy and Expert Advisory Panel: Report and Recommendations](#), p.59 (accessed 10 October 2021).

²⁶ HSC (2016): [Adult Safeguarding Operational Procedures](#) (accessed 2 November 2021).

²⁷ DoH (2020): [Minister announces plans for Adult Safeguarding Bill for Northern Ireland](#) (accessed 15 December 2021).

²⁸ Bateman, C. (2021). Sexual violence allegations brought by disabled women 'not going to court', campaign group says. *Sky News*, [online] 1 August. Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/sexual-violence-allegations-brought-by-disabled-women-not-going-to-court-charity-says-12368315>

It is essential that d/Deaf and disabled women are represented in the decision making processes which will develop the New Strategies - Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy and Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy. Without our input it is unlikely that legislation, policies, programmes and services will address our needs. Consultations processes are not always accessible to us. It is essential to partner with d/Deaf and disabled organisations to develop accessible engagement strategies.

Disaggregated disability data is needed, for example on sexual violence experienced by women and girls who are d/Deaf and/or disabled.

Disability Action recommend:

- development of Adult Safeguarding legislation in collaboration with d/Deaf and disabled people and their representative organisations, ensuring that all interventions are based on informed consent;
- increased accessibility for d/Deaf and disabled women in reporting an incident and throughout any resulting criminal process, including through provision of sign language interpreters, and independent support to fill out forms, etc;

- commissioning of further research to understand experiences of d/Deaf and disabled people in accessing domestic and sexual violence services and support and access legal redress;
- Increase funding and availability of suitably skilled and independent advocacy to enable d/ Deaf and disabled women to report abuse in all health and social care institutional settings. suitably skilled and qualified' and 'in all health and social care
- investment in commissioning of fully accessible services for d/Deaf and disabled women experiencing domestic and sexual violence including access to redress.
- Development of prevention programmes aimed at changing attitudes and norms that encourage abuse
- Healthy relationships and consent programmes for d/Deaf and disabled people
- An adequate standard of living for d/Deaf and disabled people to promote economic empowerment as a protection against abuse
- Improved measures for the identification and disclosure of abuse in supportive environments.
- Survivor groups for d/Deaf and disabled women
- Investment in mental health provision for d/Deaf and disabled women

- Training and best practice development to ensure that in all abuse health and social care and institutional settings can be identified and responded to appropriately
- Integrated provision for d/Deaf and disabled people experiencing abuse with access to legal redress
- Meaningful, well-resourced and accessible co-production with d/Deaf and disabled women and girls and their organisations.

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