

Guidance on Prevention and Response to Violence against Women and Girls with Disabilities






Purpose of The Guidance Note

This guidance note provides comprehensive support for improving prevention and response to violence against women and girls with disabilities. It is designed to assist service providers, caregivers, and community members in understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by persons with disabilities.

Scope of The Guidance Note

The guidance note covers the definitions, contextual understanding, prevention, and response to various forms of violence against women and girls with disabilities.

Understanding Violence Against Women and Girls with Disabilities

	Disability Long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers, may hinder full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. ¹
	Gender-based violence Gender-based violence refers to any violence directed at a person (male or female) based on their gender. ²
	Violence against women and girls Violence against women and girls is a subset of gender-based violence which is specifically directed at women and girls. ³

Forms of Abuse



1. Sexual Violence

This is a form of violence carried out through sexual means or by targeting a person's sexuality. It is any attempted or actual sexual act perpetrated against a person without his/her will/consent. It includes sexual abuse, sexual assault, rape, incest, child sexual abuse (defilement), sexual harassment, stalking, indecent or sexualized exposure, degrading sexual imagery, voyeurism, and cyber harassment.

It involves the use of coercion, threats, force, intimidation, harassment, and can happen either at home, workplace, school, and religious assemblies, private or public settings, anywhere and at any time. Anyone can perpetrate sexual violence, and anyone can become a survivor of the abuse.^{2,3}

Economic Abuse

A deliberate act targeted at limiting, hindering, or controlling a survivor's finances, money and/or economic resources. It usually occurs within the context of Domestic Violence or Intimate Partner Violence.²

Physical Abuse

Physical violence refers to the intentional use of physical force with the potential to cause death, injury, or harm. Examples are hitting, shaking, slapping, choking, burning, cutting, shoving, burning, torture, stoning, shooting or use of any weapons, acid attacks or any other act that results in pain, discomfort or injury.²

Psychological/Emotional Abuse









This is a form of gender-based violence that inflicts mental or emotional pain or injury to the survivor. Examples include threats of physical or sexual violence, sexual harassment, verbal abuse/harassment, downgrading/looking down on, intimidation, humiliation, forced isolation, social exclusion, stalking, unwanted attention, remarks, gestures or written words of a sexual and/or menacing nature, destruction of cherished things, and so on.⁴

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Not
All
Abuse
is
Visible
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Understanding Signs and Indicators of Abuse

Behavioural Signs

	Sudden withdrawal from social interactions and activities they previously enjoyed.		Unexplained changes in behaviour, such as increased aggression, anxiety, or depression.
	Displayed signs of fear or anxiety around certain individuals or in certain situations.		Signs of emotional distress, such as crying frequently or being unusually quiet and reserved.
	Provide inconsistent explanation for injuries or changes in behavior.		Increased use of alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism.
	Increased dependence on a specific individual, especially if that person controls access to their social interactions, money, or mobility aids.		Hesitation or refusal to communicate openly, particularly about their personal life or relationships.

Understanding Signs and Indicators of Abuse

Physical Signs

	Bruises, burns, cuts, or fractures that are unexplained or attributed to unlikely accidents.		Multiple injuries at different stages of healing, indicating ongoing abuse.
	Numerous visits to healthcare providers, especially for injuries that are poorly explained.		Sudden weight loss or gain, which could indicate stress, depression, or neglect.
	Marks on wrists, ankles, or other parts of the body that suggest the use of restraints.		Medical issues that are not being properly treated, suggesting neglect or barriers to accessing care.
	Neglect of personal hygiene and grooming, which could indicate neglect or inability to care for oneself due to abuse.		Injuries or infections in the genital area, which may indicate sexual abuse.

Barriers facing Women and Girls with Disabilities Survivors of Gender-Based Violence

Women and girls with disabilities often encounter significant barriers that prevent them from reporting abuse or seeking help, such as:

- Lack of accessible communication methods, such as sign language interpreters or materials in Braille.
- Inaccessible shelters, police stations, and healthcare facilities.
- Stigma, discrimination, and lack of awareness about their rights.
- Perceptions that women with disabilities are less credible or capable.
- Service providers, including social workers and health care providers, often lack necessary training on providing care and assistance to women and girls with disabilities who have experienced gender-based violence.
- Inadequate referral and follow-up systems for cases involving women and girls with disabilities.

Etiquette Tips: A Guide to Interacting with People with Disabilities

The following are useful strategies to help women and girls with disabilities feel and get empowered.

- Focus on the person first, not her/his disability. Persons with disabilities are human with abilities and inalienable human rights too.
- Just as the golden rule says - respect is reciprocal; provide services to persons with disabilities in a relaxed and authentic manner and treat everyone with the same respect you would expect to receive.
- Seek consent before offering assistance to a person with a disability; avoid assuming they require help without asking.

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- Never use substitutions or derogatory terms that stigmatize persons with disabilities. Example is calling them special needs instead of persons with disabilities which is the correct term and does not need to be modified.
 - Avoid using labels when you speak-they are offensive to everyone, including persons with disabilities.
 - Be polite, introduce yourself and notify about your exit. Do verbally greet and identify yourself before extending your hand to greet a person who is blind or has low vision. Use the same courtesy when entering or leaving a room or saying good-bye when ending a conversation.
 - Avoid expressions of pity towards persons with disabilities.
 - Relate or talk directly to persons with disabilities, not their aides, companions or interpreters except you have their informed consent to do so.
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Take Action: Integrating the LIVES Approach

The **LIVES** approach is a foundational framework developed by the World Health Organization for responding to violence against women including those with disabilities.⁵ It stands for **Listen, Inquire, Validate, Enhance safety, and Support**. Below is a brief explanation of each component:

L

Listen

Listen actively to women and girls with disabilities who suffer gender-based violence or harmful practices. Pay attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues.

I

Inquire

Inquire about the needs and concerns of women and girls with disabilities who suffer gender-based violence and harmful practices.

V

Validate

Validate and normalize the feelings of women and girls with disabilities who suffer gender-based violence and harmful practices.

E

Enhance safety

Assess the immediate risk(s) and concerns of women and girls with disabilities who suffer gender-based violence/harmful practices and enhance their safety.

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Support

Connect women and girls with disabilities who suffer gender-based violence/harmful practices with other resources to support their health, safety, and socio-economic needs.

Providing Support Services for Women and Girls with Disabilities facing Gender-Based Violence and Harmful Practices

The following guidelines are important for providing effective and inclusive services to women and girls with disabilities who have experienced gender-based violence/harmful practices.

- Provide accessibility and reasonable accommodation to ensure equal and full participation. This involves choosing a medium that is appropriate for persons with disabilities to exercise their rights on equal basis with others. Example, if you are interviewing a person with a hearing disability, you may need to recruit a sign language interpreter.
- Provide accessible helplines and hotlines staffed with trained professional who can offer immediate support, information, and guidance to survivors of gender-based violence with disabilities.
- Conduct awareness-raising campaigns and training sessions for service providers, law enforcement and community members on the intersection of disability and gender-based violence, as well as best practices for providing inclusive support.
- Provide assistive devices and technology to enhance the safety, mobility, and communication of survivors with disabilities.
- During intake, assessment, and care planning, service providers should actively listen to survivors without rushing or pressuring them to talk. They should pay attention to verbal and non-verbal cues and communicate directly with the survivor.
- Provide clear information to survivors, allowing them sufficient time and freedom to express their feelings, needs, and decisions. Use open-ended, simple questions and visual aids to facilitate communication.
- Recognize power dynamics between survivors and their caregivers/facilitators and ensure that survivors are not coerced into making decisions. Obtain informed consent from survivors independently or with the involvement of a trusted person chosen by the survivor.
- Provide training and capacity building programs to empower women and girls with disabilities to recognise their rights and advocate for themselves within their communities and societies.
- Support the full and effective participation of women and girls with disabilities in decisions that affect them, including service design, delivery, and monitoring.
- Ensure that any decision taken regarding the survivor is in their best interests
- Understand the concerns of families and caregivers of survivors and promote healthy relationships between them and the survivors.

References

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