

Disabled girls are vulnerable to abuse by carers and partners because of their isolation and incapacity, research says

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Disabled girls and women are vulnerable to abuse by carers and partners because of their isolation and physical incapacity, new research says.

In some cases the abuse took place in special education institutions, the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Glasgow was told today [Wednesday 15 April 2015].

Dr Sarah Woodin, of the University of Leeds, and Dr Sonali Shah, of the University of Glasgow, carried out research with 45 physically disabled or deaf women in the UK who had been abused. The project was part of a large EU-funded international study.

"There was evidence from some of the women's narratives that perpetrators exploited the fact the women were reliant on them because they were responsible for providing their personal support and giving them their medication," Dr Woodin told the conference.

"Women had limited knowledge of possible sources of support, and links to outside assistance were easily severed. Perpetrators acted to limit contact with others who might help.

"While in the majority of cases perpetrators were intimate partners, especially in early adulthood, there was evidence of institutional violence in special education institutions by care staff."

The researchers said that one woman, Lucy, told them that she had been raped at a college for people with learning difficulties that she attended in her late teens. The rapist also attended the college.

"There's a rapist out there, who raped several people," Lucy, now aged 48 and from Leeds, told them. "I was raped when I was just coming up to my 18th birthday and he physically and mentally abused me. I hated it. It also happened not just to me, it happened to four, three other people [at the college]."

Malika, 41, from Edinburgh, told the researchers that, over time, her intimate partner started to become jealous and exercise control over her. "At one point, he locked me in the flat and wouldn't let me out. He would be pursuing me and harassing me and trying to make me feel guilty."

Malika had been brought up in a residential school for disabled children in the 1980s and gave the researchers examples of paid care staff exploiting their power and not respecting the privacy of the young people. "A male staff member would barge into your room and take off the duvet, but he never dared to harm us or anything. That would not be at all tolerated today— it was just the characteristic of these kind of people, that they just feel that it's part of their work."

Elma, 39, from Leeds, told the researchers that her disability made her an easy target for perpetrators of financial abuse. "Men they can see a disabled woman and think she's an easy touch and I've had that a lot through the years. It's like they see a vulnerability and they might as well see pound signs."

Another woman, Adele, 34, and from Leeds, told the researchers how she experienced abuse from her carer and sexual partner over almost a decade: "He would purposefully give me the strongest painkillers when my friends were coming, and they couldn't come then because I was asleep. He would cancel care shifts, he would then say that I'd cancelled them."

Dr Shah said that Adele had been "groomed and sexually abused by her adult male carer when she was a young teenager. Although this must have been seen by parents and medical professionals who

were in regular contact with Adele, it was allowed to continue for a decade. One can question how such obvious paedophilia was allowed to continue for so long and whether it would have gone unreported if the survivor was not disabled.”

Dr Woodin told the conference that: “According to the disabled women in the sample, experiencing violence encompassed physical and sexual violence, verbal abuse, emotional abuse, control, isolation or economic coercion.

“Physical violence was seen in terms of being hit and beaten, psychological or emotional violence involved being verbally attacked, physically isolated from others and being conditioned to feel worthless by the perpetrator saying and doing things to purposely lower the woman’s self-esteem and confidence.

“Sometimes this was connected to their impairment, other times it was not. In the majority of cases the perpetrators were intimate partners, and the abuse took place in their private homes. However there was also evidence of institutional violence, in special education institutions, by care staff, which would warrant further research and investigation.”

The research also looked at some of the barriers that disabled women encountered when reporting abuse, such as a lack of interpreters for deaf women which could delay their giving statements to the police.

“Deaf women faced particular problems reporting abuse due to small and close social networks that meant interpreters often knew the people involved or in some instances agencies relied on perpetrators and family members to translate,” said Dr Woodin.

“This study suggests that disabled women are also more likely than non-disabled women to encounter barriers from professional support services, including the criminal justice system.” However specialist support services and disabled people’s organisations could be the key to a “new life”, she said.

- The research involved interviewees with 16 disabled women from Glasgow, Edinburgh, Ayrshire, Leeds, London, Yorkshire and the Midlands. Focus groups were also held with 29 disabled women in England and Scotland. The women were recruited through notifications on websites and Facebook, and in newsletters of disabled people’s organisations. Others learned about the work from service providers. All participants’ names are pseudonyms. The report from the research is entitled: “Access to specialised victim support services for women with disabilities who have experienced violence” by Dr Woodin, of the University of Leeds, and Dr Shah and Dr Tsitsou, of the University of Glasgow.

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Notes

1. The British Sociological Association’s annual conference takes place at Glasgow Caledonian University from 15 to 17 April 2015. Around 800 research presentations are given.

2. The British Sociological Association’s charitable aim is to promote sociology. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk