



Strategy Paper

Improving Access to Services by Women with Disabilities

Introduction

As part of the WAVE Step Up! Campaign, we are working on **the improvement of services for women with disabilities. Our goal is to make support services for gender-based violence accessible for all women, including women with disabilities.**

This paper, together with the **checklist on “How accessible is your service for women with disabilities”** is intended to provide some ideas for your local campaign. This paper offers some basic information on the problem and a few suggestions for activities you could do in your area. Please see the **Campaign Blueprint**, available on the **Campaign Website** (www.wave-stepup.org) for more information on the Campaign.

Violence against women with disabilities

A representative survey of women with disabilities in Germany showed that women with disability are **twice as likely to experience emotional or physical violence** as women on average and, **three times more likely to experience sexual violence** (Schrötte et al., 2012 p.23 – 24 – a summary of this study is available in English online¹). The study showed that deaf women, in particular, were most at risk of experiencing all forms of gender-based violence (GBV). Women with disabilities, therefore, have a great need of women’s specialist support services for victims of GBV. Moreover, these services are legally bound to provide services to women with disabilities.

Legal Framework

The Istanbul Convention Article 4 Paragraph 3 states: “The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, **disability**, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status” (Council of Europe 2012 p. 7).

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Article 16 “Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse” emphasises the need for a **gender-based violence approach to violence against people with disabilities**.

Main Challenge

An EU project “Access to Specialised Victim Support Services for Women with Disabilities who have experienced violence” demonstrated that, despite their greater need and their entitlement to specialist support services for victims of GBV, **many women with disabilities are not accessing the services they need** and many do not even know that such support services exist (Udl et al., 2014 p. 8-9ⁱⁱ). It may not be possible for women’s specialist support services to immediately provide a full service to every woman who needs help, but it should be possible to provide some level of service immediately and, in cooperation with other professionals from other agencies, **provide a much improved service than is currently being offered**.

Possible Campaign Strategies

The **greatest barrier to women accessing specialist support services is lack of information** on what GBV is and knowledge about where to go for help. It is therefore a priority for specialist support services to ensure that their publicity material is reaching these particular groups of women.

Reach out to women with disabilities and ask them to be involved in making your service more accessible. They are the experts in their own lives and are best qualified to help plan services that meet their needs. In research on GBV with women with disabilities in Austria, Iceland, Germany and UK “peer counselling”, that is being able to talk to another woman with disability about their experiences, was often mentioned as an important step to improving accessibility of specialist support services (<http://women-disabilities-violence.humanrights.at>).

Forming alliances with organisations that work with women with disabilities, enables specialist support services to become better informed about what physical, social and cognitive barriers need to be reduced and, at the same time, informs professionals in those specific fields about the realities of GBV and the specialist support services that are available. Those professionals in turn, can give advice to specialist support services on how to advertise their service in the most appropriate way.

Making printed or online information **as simple to understand as possible**, makes it more accessible to all women. Using large font sizes, not too much information on one page, avoiding jargon or foreign words, and using easy to understand symbols makes it easier to convey messages.

Implementing a **barrier-free website** is another way to make information accessible.

Women’s specialist support services could consider organising a **regular advice session at a centre that is used by people with disabilities** and is, for example, wheelchair accessible. It may be possible to combine this service with another organisation (on women’s health; women’s employment and training etc.) to reduce the stigma attached to women approaching your organisation for advice. This could help to break down barriers between services for people with disabilities and women’s services.

Doing a presentation on your service, giving a talk on GBV or having **an exhibition** in a centre used by people with disabilities can help get the message across about what GBV is and how often women, and women with disabilities, are affected. Doing this kind of outreach work could help start a discussion amongst people with disabilities on issues relating to sexuality, sexual consent and appropriate boundaries.

In order to make specialist support services more accessible to differently abled women, organisations should offer **telephone and email counselling**, or consider offering first contact **by text messages**. In addition, **confidential chat rooms, audio text and sign language videos** may make information on GBV and support services more widely available. It is important that these services are free of charge.

Centres offering counselling and support need to clearly state on their website and in their publicity material **what barriers their service has** (e.g. if stairs, how many steps; if communication assistance e.g. sign language etc., is available) to encourage women with disabilities to make contact. Most importantly, services should have the voice and needs of women with disabilities at the forefront of their work and continuously ask individual women what their needs are when introducing new developments and protocols.

Organisations should employ staff who can communicate in **sign language**. If a woman who needs assistance in order to communicate contacts a support service, she should be asked if she wants to bring a **trusted assistant** with her to the counselling session. Alternatively, she may prefer to have an assistant who has been trained on the subject of GBV provided by the support service. Women who need to talk about their experience of violence may feel more comfortable with someone they already know and trust, or they may want someone who has no contact to their everyday lives. Support services, therefore, should have women they can call on as required, who are trained on the subject of GBV and know how to provide communication assistance.

Women's specialist support services should offer **training for staff** working with people with disabilities. At the same time as they provide training on GBV, they can learn more about how to make their service more accessible to women with disabilities. Staff in contact with women with disabilities need to know the **facts of GBV**, and particularly how they relate to women with disabilities. Organizations working with people with disability need to **improve their level of awareness of GBV** in order to be better at identifying when this may be a problem. They need to know how to **encourage women to speak out** about GBV they have experienced and they need to know **how to respond and refer women to specialist support**. Staff may also need help to develop **protocols on how to deal with internal complaints** about GBV perpetrated by other people within their organisation, and services should screen staff on a regular basis.

Get expert advice on how to make your service more accessible to women with disabilities e.g. sensory accessibility, colour coding hallways, signposting stairs etc., so women with poor sight can find their way about; a barrier-free website using symbols to demonstrate what services are accessible; ramps for women in wheelchairs etc. This information is already available to women's specialist support services in some countries and can be developed in others with the help of the local government department responsible for people with disability.

Making small changes in the way an organization operates, such as providing mobile support or, holding counselling sessions in another accessible location once a week, can make a huge difference in accessibility without requiring immediate costly structural changes. This would enable organisations to prove that a need exists, for which European states must demonstrate **due diligence, by providing specialist support services with the necessary capacity and resources**.

Ableism discriminates against people who are differently abled and can sometimes be deliberate but often is unconscious and unintentional. However, the impact of ableism is to exclude people who are differently abled from accessing resources and support that they need and to which they are entitled. Ableism, that is seeing the world from one point of view which is defined as "normal",

devalues and limits the opportunities available to people with disabilities. Not questioning the assumptions of the “normal” world relegates people who have developmental, emotional, physical and psychiatric disabilities to an inferior status. **Challenging ableism within ourselves and our organisations is an important step to ensuring that support for victims of GBV is available to all women.**

Steps

If you are interested in campaigning on improved access to services for women with disability;

- **Reach out to women with disabilities to help make your service more accessible**
- **Make contact with local groups working with women with disabilities and discuss together what you can do** in your local area
- Don't forget to target **relevant stakeholders, networks and organisations** who work on disability in your country
- Use **social media to involve women with disabilities**
- Finally, we advise keeping your **local and national government** informed of your local campaign
- Last but not least, use the **Step Up! Campaign Website** www.wave-stepup.org to share your activities with other members and campaigners

Don't hesitate to get in touch if we (kelly.blank@wave-network.org and patricia.bell@wave-network.org) can be of help.

If you are planning any events, you could take advantage of the following dates:

International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women:

25th November 2016

International Day of People with Disabilities: 3rd December 2016

International Human Rights Day: 10th December 2016

16 Days of Activism: 25th November – 10th December 2016

One Billion Rising: 14th February 2017

European Day for Victims of Crime: 22nd February 2017

International Woman's Day: 8th March 2017

ⁱ <http://www.bmfsfj.de/RedaktionBMFSFJ/Broschuerenstelle/Pdf-Anlagen/Lebenssituation-und-Belastungen-von-Frauen-Kurzfassung-englisch,property=pdf,bereich=bmfsfj,sprache=de,rwb=true.pdf>

ⁱⁱ More information on this project in English, German and Icelandic are available from <http://women-disabilities-violence.humanrights.at>