

# Figuring Violence

## Violence Against Women with Disabilities

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Recent international research reveals that women with disabilities are at high risk of experiencing violence.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), one in five people in Australia have a disability, defined as 'any limitation, restriction or impairment, which has lasted, or is likely to last, for at least six months and restricts everyday activities' (ABS 2003).

Keran Howe's review of the research (2000) showed that there is a lack of statistical information available in Australia on the rates of violence against women with disabilities, including domestic violence. However, international research, including two recent studies from Canada and the USA reveals that women with disabilities are at greater risk of experiencing violence than are women without disabilities.

Based on a representative sample of 7,027 Canadian women living in a marital or defacto relationship, a study by Brownridge (2006) examined the risk for partner violence against women with disabilities relative to women without disabilities. The data was drawn from telephone interviews about criminal victimisation undertaken in 1999 for Statistics Canada's General Social Survey (GSS).

Findings include:

- Women with disabilities had 40 per cent greater odds of experiencing violence from a partner in the past 5 years. Some 4.9 per cent of women with disabilities experienced partner violence, compared to 3.5 per cent of women who didn't have disabilities.
- Women with disabilities were at particular risk of being subjected to severe violence. They were twice as

likely as women without disabilities to report being beaten and kicked, bit, or hit with a fist.

- Women with disabilities were also three times more likely to report being forced into any sexual activity by being threatened, held down, or hurt in some way.

A study in North Carolina USA looked at whether having a disability was associated with a risk of being assaulted in the past year (Martin et al 2006). The data was drawn from a household telephone survey of 5,326 women in North Carolina. Of these women 26 per cent said they had some type of disability. The findings include:

- Women with disabilities were as likely as women without disabilities to experience physical violence in the past year (approximately 2 per cent of women in both groups experienced physical violence – current or ex-partners were the most common perpetrators).
- Women with disabilities had more than four times the odds of experiencing sexual assault in the past year (again, current or ex-partners were most likely to be the perpetrators of sexual assaults).

Brownridge (2006) notes that there are particular forms of abuse that are unique to women with disabilities, such as removal of an accessibility device, withholding medication, and threatening institutionalisation. These acts were not included in the surveys described above, which means that the prevalence of partner abuse against women with disabilities was underestimated.

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The importance of asking about particular forms of abuse experienced by women with disabilities was illustrated in a study by McFarlane et al. (2001), who surveyed 511 women with physical disabilities using the Abuse Assessment Screen Disability instrument questionnaire. This questionnaire included standard forms of physical and sexual abuse, and specific questions on abuse that relate to women with disabilities (e.g. being prevented from using a wheelchair, respirator, or other assistive devices). Of the women surveyed, 9.8 per cent reported experiencing at least one form of abuse in the past year (including these disability-related forms of abuse). Without inclusion of the disability-related questions, the prevalence would have been 7.8 per cent.

## References:

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## Family Violence Law Reform in Victoria - the Whole Package Campaign

The Victorian Law Reform Commission has recommended a major overhaul to better protect victims of violence under the Victorian *Crimes (Family Violence) Act 1987* (see [www.lawreform.vic.gov.au](http://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au)).

The recommendations include that victims should be able to remain in the family home, court staff and police should be provided with training on family violence, and that a specialist police family violence prosecutions unit should be set up. If the reforms are implemented, they could change the culture of the justice system, providing greater protection for victims including those who have experienced non-physical forms of abuse. They could also make legal protection more accessible.

## Act Now to Support the Reforms

The **Victorian Family Violence Justice Reform Campaign** is calling on people to support the introduction of the whole package of reforms. The Campaign is coordinated by Domestic Violence Victoria and the Federation of Community Legal Services (Vic) Inc. DVIRC is participating in the campaign, along with other organisations.

Whether you are an individual who has experienced family violence or you are from an organisation, you have a vital role to play in encouraging Members of Parliament to implement of the recommendations. The more letters, phone calls and visits MPs receive, the more seriously they will take this issue.

Download a Campaign Kit and sample letter to MPs from [www.communitylaw.org.au](http://www.communitylaw.org.au) and find out how you can help (under News on the homepage).

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