

BREAKING THE SILENCE

A project to understand the experiences of young women with intellectual disability who have experienced domestic violence, and their attempts to seek help in the Illawarra region.

January 2017



PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project goal

To increase understanding and awareness of domestic and family violence experiences of young women (18-35) with a mild to moderate intellectual disability in the Illawarra region, and to work towards reduced risk and improved support for these women.

90%

of Australian women with an intellectual disability have been subject to sexual abuse and/or domestic violence, with more than **two-thirds (68%)** having been sexually abused before they turned 18 years of age.¹

Project aims and objectives

- Improve awareness, understanding and identification of violence against women with disabilities across the health, violence and disability service sectors in the Illawarra.
- Foster improved access to services and safety for these women by increasing the capacity of staff who work with this target group, to identify, support and correctly refer women who are victims of violence to the appropriate support services.
- Help young women with a mild to moderate intellectual disability to understand the nature and extent of domestic violence and assault that may exist in their communities.
- Develop appropriate programs and resources for the young women, to improve their awareness about violence and abuse and increase their capacity to seek help and find pathways to safety.
- To develop resources and tools for service providers to better identify, support and correctly refer women who are victims of violence to appropriate support services.

Background

This project was initiated to explore how domestic and family violence affects the lives of local Illawarra women with an intellectual disability, and to increase information, awareness and support for these women.

Australian research shows that women and girls with disabilities are twice as likely to experience violence as those without.² Women with disability also experience significantly higher levels of all forms of violence and are subjected to such violence by a greater number of perpetrators.³

Many of these young women often do not recognise that what they are experiencing is domestic or sexual violence. We know that when these young women do seek help there are not the services available that can provide sufficient care and supervision for them to move into supported accommodation, follow a court process, take out a domestic violence order or seek a place of safety.

The Project was implemented in a 12 month timeframe by the Illawarra Women's Health Centre, with a Steering Committee of key stakeholders. Funding was provided by the Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District.

Illawarra Women's Health Centre gratefully acknowledges the contributions made by Illawarra women who gave generously of their time, and talked openly and with courage of their experiences.

Illawarra Women's Health Centre also acknowledges the contributions made by the Steering Committee members, participating service providers and peak representative bodies who provided valuable input throughout the project.

¹ Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) (2010) Family Violence — A National Legal Response. ALRC Final Report 114.
² Women With Disabilities Victoria (2014).
³ Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) (2007b) 'Forgotten Sisters - A global review of violence against women with disabilities'.



THE PROJECT



Project preparation

Prior to the project commencing, a review of existing research and programs addressing domestic and family violence experienced by women with disabilities was completed.

The literature review highlighted forms of domestic and family violence specific to women with disabilities include:

- Physical violence, such as withholding food, water, medication, disability-related equipment or support services and the misuse of medication as a restraint
- Sexual violence, such as inappropriate touching during caregiving, taking control of reproductive processes and demanding sexual activities
- Emotional violence, such as denying or trivialising disability, threatening institutionalisation or the withdrawal of care, and threatening to hurt guide dogs, pets and family members
- Financial violence, such as refusing to pay for essential medication or disability related equipment.

A six week health and wellbeing pilot program was also delivered by the Illawarra Women's Health Centre to young women employed by Greenacres Disability Service. This program enabled a deeper understanding of the type and form of health information and assistance the women were seeking, including for domestic violence.

The Project model

Women with a mild to moderate intellectual disability aged 18-35 years of age (n.6) were interviewed about their past experiences of violence or abuse. Women could take a support person of their choice with them to the interview. These women were already engaged with disability service providers who contributed to ensuring safety during this process.

More than forty service providers were contacted and a focus group discussion was held with disability and community sector workers, and individual interviews conducted with staff from four service providers in the youth and disability sectors, who had clients in the target group.

A range of discussions were held at interagency forums, with disability service provider teams and with local police, health and local refuge services representatives.

Women's experiences

Key findings from the interviews highlighted the critical and devastating nature of this issue:

- They had multiple experiences of different forms of violence e.g. physical, sexual, financial, emotional and verbal abuse
- Perpetrators can include partners, neighbours, parents, other relatives and their partners, carers and authority figures
- Most did not realise that what they had experienced was abuse until it was raised by someone else
- None had received adequate sexual education before becoming sexually active
- They had received very limited post trauma support. One client said when asked why she didn't report the abuse: "No-one asked me about it"
- Feelings of shame were universal. Many experienced fear and anxiety that:
 - People would think they were stupid for leaving a relationship
 - They would struggle to live alone, if single
 - Reporting domestic violence would result in their children being removed
- The need for an advocate or support person who could accompany them to interviews or appointments was identified by all.

KEY FINDINGS



Service providers

Key findings from service providers included the need for increased:

- Awareness, training and referral pathways for disability service providers to better identify, support and refer women with an intellectual disability, experiencing domestic violence.
- Training for domestic violence, police, health and child protection sectors on working with women with intellectual disabilities.
- Accessible Psychometric Assessment services for adult women who have never been assessed as having an intellectual disability.
- Advocates trained in domestic violence and disability and more frequent and transparent dialogue between services.
- Awareness by women about the dangers of using social media, chat rooms, dating sites and smart phone apps and the ways perpetrators use these.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

25 women and families were assisted to access appropriate domestic violence support and services.



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women shared their story, identifying significant barriers to accessing support.

Health and Wellbeing Program for young women with a mild to moderate intellectual disability delivered at Greenacres Disability Service. Support for this to continue.

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WEEKS



The project revealed:

- An unmet need for targeted support for women with an intellectual disability seeking to escape and recover from violent relationships.
- High demand for an appropriately designed health and wellbeing group program for women with an intellectual disability to explore sexual health, contraception, healthy relationships, violence and consent, delivered in a safe environment.



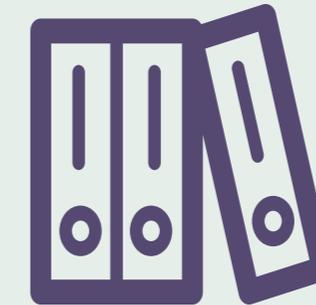
Increased awareness and profile of target groups experiences of domestic violence in local media.

Health and wellbeing program educational package and resources developed for disability service providers working with young women with an intellectual disability.



Training package developed for disability and domestic violence workers.

Improved professional networks between local disability and domestic violence sectors.



Training package, resources and handouts developed for women with an intellectual disability.



Training manual for disability service providers doing group work with women with an intellectual disability on general health and wellbeing issues.

THE WAY FORWARD

The project identified a range of next steps to increase identification, support, and women with a mild to moderate intellectual disability, at risk of, or experiencing, domestic and family violence.



Further research is required to fully understand the experiences of these women, and the barriers they face to accessing appropriate services and support.



Enhanced support (including case management) for women with an intellectual disability to assist them to navigate the service delivery system towards safety.



Education and resources targeting women with an intellectual disability who are experiencing, or at risk of, domestic and family violence. This includes on topics of general, mental and sexual health, healthy relationships and safety (including cyber safety).



Better education and training for service providers across the disability, health, justice and police, and domestic violence sectors in working with women with an intellectual disability who may be experiencing, or at risk of, domestic and family violence.

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