



MANY women with sensory, intellectual and/or physical disabilities are unable to communicate through speech, which makes them even more vulnerable to abuse.

The voice that helps the silent

Aid for women with disabilities

JUAN BORNMAN

WITH August being Women's Month, campaigns are being launched across the media to raise awareness of violence against women. But women with disabilities often fall outside these initiatives – even though they are four to 10 times more susceptible to being victims of sexual and physical abuse.

Ronel* is one such woman.

"I am scared. What if he finds me again?" Ronel types on her cellphone. She has a disability and cannot speak. Thanks to social services, and a protracted court case, she lives in a safe home for people with disabilities. As a young girl she was sexually abused by the very people she should have been able to trust.

Fortunately, a social worker noticed the abuse and neglect, and brought Ronel to the Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (CAAC) at the University of Pretoria (UP), where she received a communication tool. Special communication software on a computer enabled her to relate what had happened, and to finally bring about justice.

The fruits of such communication aids are already evident. In collaboration with the National Prosecuting Authority and the South African Judicial Education Institute, CAAC now offers workshops and lectures that empower lawyers to give people with severe communication disabilities a fair chance at justice. The first positive results were apparent in a case last month in Upington, where a man who raped a young speech-impaired girl was convicted after she was able to testify in court with a communication aid.

Many women within the sphere of disability – those with sensory, intellectual and/or physical disabilities – are unable to communicate through speech, which makes them even more vulnerable to abuse. After all, from the perspective of the assailant, a "silent" victim is the perfect victim. To broader society, these women are invisible and inaudible. These are precisely the characteristics that are exploited, and prospective rapists identify these women as easy targets.

Several factors contribute to their

vulnerability. Women like Ronel often cannot fight back or call for help. If they try, they might not be understood, or their efforts to communicate could be misinterpreted. Victims also fear the backlash of a perpetrator in cases where this person is a caregiver or helper, or when the caregiver is the breadwinner. These women usually have to rely on assistance with self-care, getting dressed, eating or using the toilet – it is the intimacy of these activities that makes them particularly vulnerable.

While the number of abuse and sexual offences against people with disabilities is rising, the percentage of disclosure and reporting is lower. According to statistics obtained from a South African court, only one in three of all rapes reported by the police is referred to court, and barely one in 20 results in sentencing. This figure might be even lower if the victim is unable to speak. This could be because police officers, lawyers, magistrates, prosecutors, judges, even counsellors lack the knowledge or skills to help a person with a disability. This is where CAAC's workshops and lectures are playing a vital role.

A government has a duty to protect all its citizens, especially defenceless ones who cannot speak for themselves. If the government really wants to break the silence around the abuse of women with disabilities, various strategies are needed. Women who cannot communicate must be seen and heard; to do this they must be equipped with communication aids such as communication boards, electronic aids and sign language. Only then will the full extent of the evils become known.

Everyone needs to be taught to look closer and listen more carefully to what women with disabilities who cannot speak for themselves are trying to tell us. Einstein did not warn in vain that the world is a dangerous place – not because of evil people who commit evil deeds, but because of people who choose to remain spectators.

*Name has been changed.

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