



Women with disabilities suffer more abuse if voices unheard

By **Juan Bornman**

With August being Women's Month in SA, various campaigns are being launched 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 (not her real name) 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. Ronel is in the same boat as many other women 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). 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 in Pretoria and the SA Judicial Education Institute, the CAAC now offers workshops and lectures that empower lawyers to give people with

Awareness campaigns against sexual violence on women bypass the disabled

severe communication disabilities a fair chance at justice. The first positive results were apparent in the July case in Uppington, Northern Cape, where a man who raped a young speech-impaired girl was found guilty after she was able to testify in court with a communication aid.

Many women with sensory, intellectual and/or physical disabilities are unable to communicate through speech, which makes them 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.

Moreover, to facilitate personal care, people with disabilities are taught from an early age to allow adults to look at and touch their naked bodies. It is therefore often difficult for them to assert themselves, and say "no". Special schools, sheltered labour and care homes restrict access to structures they may use for protection.

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 an SA court, only one in three of all rapes reported by 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 the CAAC's workshops and lectures are playing a vital role.

A government has a duty to protect all its citizens, especially the defenceless ones who cannot speak for themselves. If 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 aids such as communication boards, electronic aids and sign language. Only then will the full extent of the evils become known.

They also need to be taught from an early age how to respond if they have been a victim of violence or assault. Supportive assistance should be provided to families who fear the consequences of reporting a crime. A partnership between the police, the judiciary and others must be fostered to obtain systemic co-operation that will advance each investigation and lead to eventual prosecution and conviction. Molesters and exploiters need to be made aware that they will be arrested and sentenced.

Professor Bornman of the Centre for Augmentative and Alternative Communication at the University of Pretoria is also president of the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication.



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