

PARLIAMENTARY BRIEF

Human Trafficking of diverse women and girls with disabilities in Canada

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DisAbled Women's Network
Réseau d'action des femmes handicapées


ABOUT THE DISABLED WOMEN'S NETWORK OF CANADA (DAWN- RAFH CANADA)

DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN-RAFH) Canada is a national, feminist, cross-disability organization whose mission is to end the poverty, isolation, discrimination and violence experienced by Canadian women with disabilities and Deaf women. DAWN-RAFH is an organization that works towards the advancement and inclusion of women and girls with disabilities and Deaf women in Canada. Our overarching strategic theme is one of leadership, partnership and networking to engage all levels of government and the wider disability and women's sectors and other stakeholders in addressing our key issues.

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Multiple factors, rooted in systemic ableism and other forms of oppression, make girls, women, and gender diverse people with disabilities, especially those from historically marginalized groups (i.e., racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, and those living in poverty), not only vulnerable to, but targeted for trafficking. These factors include, and are not limited to, communications barriers, increased likelihood to live in poverty, lack of inclusive and affirming sexual education or access to sexual health services, reliance on or control of caregivers, stereotypes labelling them as not sexual or hypersexual, barriers with the criminal justice system, and not being believed when reporting abuse.ⁱ

The patterns of sexual violence experienced by women and girls with disabilities reveal a form of exploitation that must be addressed in anti-trafficking strategies. Specifically, violent victimization against women and girls with disabilities often starts in childhood and increases possibilities of revictimization in other life stages, often by multiple perpetrators who are often in positions of power and trust.ⁱⁱ These patterns occur precisely because the survivors are women and girls with disabilities: violence and exploitation are sometimes perceived as justified or permissible, survivors are deemed less credible, and they may rely on the abusers for caregiving, housing, and other basic needsⁱⁱⁱ. The repeated nature of violence paired with its invisibility lead to its normalization for women and girls with disabilities over the life course, making it hard to recognize.

The intersectional experiences of diverse women, girls, and gender diverse people with disabilities are particularly missing from

Canadian trafficking reports, and responses—sustaining barriers for the most marginalized. Research illustrates that women and girls with intellectual, cognitive, severe physical disabilities, and with mental health conditions, are particularly vulnerable to childhood sexual violence, gender-based violence, and human trafficking, because perpetrators perceive them as more vulnerable, less likely to report, and to be believed.

The limited data available on race shows that Black, racialized, and Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse people are vastly overrepresented as survivors of trafficking.^{iv} In 2016, Public Safety Canada reported that approximately half of trafficking survivors in Canada are Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQI+ people, even though they represent 4% of the Canadian population. Historical and ongoing forms of colonialism, including residential schools, intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, inadequate access to affordable and safe housing, make Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQI+ people particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence and trafficking specifically.^v These same factors, paired to increased likelihood of violent victimization, make Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQI+ people more likely to live with a disability, including invisible disabilities (e.g.: traumatic brain injury and mental health conditions). Anti-trafficking strategies, especially those targeting Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQI+ people must consider how disability shapes their specific and heightened vulnerability to exploitation, trafficking, and violence more broadly.

The federal government does not name women and girls with disabilities as one of the most at-risk groups, even though women, girls, and gender diverse people with disabilities are overrepresented in all the identified at-risk groups, namely Indigenous women and girls, 2SLGBTQI+ persons, children and youth in the child welfare system, and those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.^{vi} In addition, Statistics Canada reports on human trafficking do not provide disaggregated on disability, race, Indigenous status, sexuality, or social class. Finally, there is a lack of research and data on labour exploitation of women, girls, and gender diverse people with disabilities in Canada and globally.

Recommendations

1. Address the systemic barriers that make women and girls with disabilities and other groups more vulnerable to trafficking: isolation, social exclusion and discrimination, low income and poverty, housing precarity, inadequate access support services.
2. Dismantle laws that perpetuate discriminatory law-enforcement practices with Black, Indigenous, and other racial minorities.
3. Establish funding and partnership mechanisms that strengthen community capacity and that connect and sustain allies in their collective work to recognize, prevent, and address gender-based violence and trafficking of women, girls, and gender diverse people with disabilities.
4. Integrate an intersectional approach to provincial, territorial, and federal inquiries into systemic violence that recognizes how multiple systems of oppression are interconnected.
5. Explicitly name women, girls, and gender diverse people with disabilities, especially those living with intellectual, invisible, or mental health conditions, as well as those who are racialized or Indigenous, as facing a higher risk of trafficking in human trafficking policies.
6. Collect disaggregated data on all forms of human trafficking, including types of disability, race, Indigenous status, sexuality, and social class.
7. Center disability in trafficking responses and public education as many survivors become disabled because of trafficking, and their disability makes them targets of trafficking.
8. Commit to an anti-racist and anti-colonial framework and to the meaningful participation of disability civil society organizations working with diverse women and girls with disabilities and other civil society organizations representing groups particularly vulnerable to trafficking in designing and implementing anti-trafficking responses and monitoring mechanisms.
9. Connect funding to appropriate, accessible, inclusive, affirming, and culturally-sensitive trauma-informed supports for survivors of GBV and trafficking.

ⁱ Reid, J. A. (2018). Sex trafficking of girls with intellectual disabilities: An exploratory mixed methods study. *Sexual Abuse, 30*(2), 107-131.; Ledingham, E., Wright, G. W., & Mitra, M. (2022). Sexual violence against women with disabilities: experiences with force and lifetime risk. *American journal of preventive medicine, 62*(6), 895-902.

ⁱⁱ Walsh, C. A., Ploeg, J., Lohfeld, L., Horne, J., MacMillan, H., & Lai, D. (2007). Violence across the lifespan: Interconnections among forms of abuse as described by marginalized Canadian elders and their care-givers. *British Journal of Social Work, 37*(3), 491-514.; Cotter, A. (2018) Violence and Victimization of Women with Disabilities. *Statistics Canada*. Available at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54910-eng.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Reid, J. A. (2018). Sex trafficking of girls with intellectual disabilities: An exploratory mixed methods study. *Sexual Abuse, 30*(2), 107-131.; Nichols, A., & Heil, E. (2022). Human

trafficking of people with a disability: An Analysis of state and federal cases. *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence, 7*(1), 1.

^{iv} Reid, J. A. (2018). Sex trafficking of girls with intellectual disabilities: An exploratory mixed methods study. *Sexual Abuse, 30*(2), 107-131.

^v National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. (2019). *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Volume 1a* (Vol. 1a); Olson-Pitawanakwat, B., & Baskin, C. (2021). In between the missing and murdered: The need for Indigenous-led responses to trafficking. *Affilia, 36*(1), 10-26.

^{vi} Public Safety Canada (2023). About Human Trafficking. <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/cntrng-crm/hmn-trffckng/abt-hmn-trffckng-en.aspx>