
InFocus: Bringing people with disabilities into the picture—A National Pan-Canadian Community Leadership Initiative

➔ By DisAbleD Women's Network/Réseau d'action des femmes handicapées (DAWN—RAFH), Montreal, Canada



Topic area: Issues of ACCESS for girls and women with disabilities in order to prevent or eliminate violence, exploitation and abuse.

Background

DAWN Canada is now celebrating its 30th Anniversary and it was founded in 1985 following a meeting between seventeen women from across Canada who came together to discuss issues of mutual concern. DAWN brought together a diverse community of deaf women and women with disabilities (hereinafter “women with disabilities” for brevity, recognizing that DAWN prefers to use the terms “deaf women” and “women with disabilities” in tandem), including aboriginal women, lesbians, older women or women of color. DAWN's comprehensive mission includes, among other things, to be a resource for and about women with disabilities and our concerns; to be a bridge between women with disabilities and the women's movement; and to work together with the women's movement on issues which affect all women and to help the movement become more accessible to women with disabilities.

Canada is the second largest country in the world, smaller only to Russia. The population of 28 million comprises great ethnic and linguistic diversity. According to a study by the Government of Canada, an estimated 3.8 million adult Canadians reported being limited in their daily activities due to a disability in 2012. This represents 13.7% of the adult population. At least 53% of all people with disabilities in Canada are women. In Canada today, sexual assault of women with disabilities takes place at a rate twice that of the general population of women. For women with intellectual disabilities and deaf women the rate is higher than that for other women with disabilities. Almost 80% of women with disabilities have experienced physical violence by their intimate partners compared to 29% of women without disabilities; and sexual offences are the most common type of abuse against women with disabilities. Furthermore, to compound the problems, the unemployment rate among women with disabilities is up to 75%, 58% of women with disabilities live on less than \$10,000 per year; of those, 23% live on less than \$5,000 per year.

What happened?

DAWN developed an assessment tool, the “National Accessibility and Accommodation Survey” (NAAS), and undertook an accessibility assessment of domestic and gender-based violence shelters and programs. They found that across Canada, few rape crisis centres and transition houses are accessible to women with various disabilities. DAWN produced a video “We Can Tell and We Will Tell”, which presented the thoughts and experiences of various people with disabilities with respect to violence, including gender-based and sexual violence. The video has been shown at workshops conducted by DAWN's partners. The implementation of the InFocus project was a collaboration between DAWN Canada and the Canadian Association for Community Living (CACL), with DAWN taking the lead on the development of the tool kit, training

materials and other resources and CACL assisting with the identification of community partners in the 10 provinces and 3 territories in Canada. This approach ensured that the project reflected the needs and input of their specific target communities and also fostered the greater capacity of local Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) throughout Canada. Each community partner was provided with workshop tool kits in advance of the workshops and each partner was encouraged to adapt the training materials to the cultural and other specific needs of their communities. The InFocus project organized roundtables of women with disabilities throughout Canada to gain a better understanding of the specific violence issues they faced, and to increase understanding of their needs and experiences. This sharing helped women to understand that they were not alone in experiencing gender-based violence and abuse. The facilitators/local organizers received an initial training and were provided with a comprehensive guide on facilitating focus groups of survivors and their local advisory committees. Evaluations of the trainings were brought back to the national team, which in turn informed the final design of the roundtables. The InFocus project held numerous workshops throughout Canada. One group of workshops focused on disability sensitivity training for healthcare providers, violence prevention workers, teachers, police and other front-line workers. In addition, information sessions were held to understand challenges and barriers, as well as practical things that can be done to make their workplaces more inclusive.

A second group of workshops raised awareness amongst women and girls with disabilities on risk factors for gender-based and sexual violence, explored proactive steps women could take in such situations, and enhanced the understanding of women with disabilities with respect to addressing violence and obtaining services.

What worked?

Lead organizations to implement the project were identified in each community, ensuring that learnings and outcomes were integrated into the local communities and lead organizations. In some communities disability rights organizations were the lead organization while in others more broadly focused human rights organizations led the effort. This approach enhanced the integration of disability issues into the disability rights community and broader human rights community. The project helped to build the capacities of the lead organizations; identifying and securing commitments from key local partners, forming a local cross-sectoral steering committee and securing institutional backing through the lead organizations. Women with disabilities who participated in the workshops were especially grateful for the availability of counselors during the sessions as these workshops raised many very emotional and traumatic personal issues. The support of counselors was vital for the maintenance of a "safe space" for them. Participants in both types of workshops appreciated the very comprehensive and useful handbooks that were distributed at the workshops.

What changed?

Service providers, including front-line workers and management representatives, provided feedback demonstrating a greater awareness of the nature and scope of the barriers faced by women with disabilities in accessing services, and expressed a significant desire for additional practical and locally-relevant resources and tools to aid them in making the changes necessary in their own practices and within their organizations to make their communities more accessible and inclusive for women with disabilities.

Law enforcement officials and police indicated they had a greater understanding of the violence issues facing women with

disabilities and recognized that their agencies needed to address these issues in their training and work.

Some DPOs previously had not been informed about nor engaged in addressing issues concerning gender-based violence and women with disabilities. Their involvement with the InFocus project facilitated their engagement on these issues. Disabled women came to understand their experiences were shared and respected by others. They also learned of the availability of community resources to address these important issues. A unique feature of this project is that it provides participants the opportunity to reflect on and understand their experience of violence in a systemic way, leading to discussions on how to make positive changes.

In those communities where the lead organization was a human rights organization or a women's rights organization, issues of violence against women with disabilities have been increasingly incorporated into their work.

What did we learn?

DAWN's unique expertise, its reputation and engagement with diverse partners and its national reach make it uniquely positioned to influence change and increase awareness among the women's rights community, the anti-violence and victim's rights community, government officials and women with disabilities and deaf women ourselves. Dawn's reputation and the respect for its work in the communities was helpful in obtaining collaboration of implementing partners and also in developing tools and strategies that were comprehensive and easy-to-use.

Some of the organizations with which DAWN collaborated were well-established in their communities while others were more recently formed. In those communities with less established DPOs, implementation of the project was slower but the project served as a catalyst for the advancement of the local organizations. For example, in the indigenous Nunavut Community in rural western

Canada, the DPO partner is newly formed and discussion of issues of violence against women with disabilities was a somewhat taboo subject. The project created a powerful catalyst for change, but implementation proceeded more slowly there, in part due to the limited funds the partner has to continue the work. On the other hand, the more established DPO in Vancouver was better equipped to implement more aspects of the project and has been successful in obtaining additional funding to continue the work. This learning demonstrates that implementation of a nationwide project is complex and must be flexible to respond to the specific community and organizational context. Additional specialized training for staff in local communities to develop their organizational capacity and ability to conduct outreach activities in the diverse and widely dispersed rural communities would be helpful. Additional funding to enable DAWN to assist the less developed local DPOs to hire more staff rather than rely on volunteers also would have a great impact on the effectiveness of the organization and its implementation of the project.

Service providers expressed a strong intention to make their facilities and programs more accessible to women with disabilities. It would be very useful to re-assess the specific changes implemented in such programs, perhaps by again using the "National Accessibility and Accommodation Survey". Many of the women with disabilities participating in the workshops used the space to express their own emotions and personal issues. Because of this there was not sufficient time to develop their personal plans for coping with violence. Given the strong personal emotions that were expressed, it would have been appropriate to have some follow-up sessions, but the scope of the project did not permit additional sessions. Some participants found that the videos, which presented other disabled people's experiences with violence, were a trigger for their raw emotions.

The consultant who evaluated DAWN's project noted that in some communities, the timing between the focus groups and the workshops was too long and the energy around the issues dissipated. The timing of the delivery of the facilitators' tool kit was not sufficient to allow some organizations to prepare and adopt the tool kit to the specific needs of their communities.

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