WAVE – Women Against Violence and Exploitation

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All About Developmental Disabilities
AADD
At AADD our target population is people with developmental disabilities, primarily intellectual disabilities, who live below the poverty level.

Serve a 3 county area in metropolitan Atlanta.
Violence against women with disabilities

The incidence of violence against women with disabilities is staggering, happening with greater frequency than for women without disabilities in the general population.
Abuse and exploitation of people with disabilities

- Victims with some level of intellectual impairment are at highest risk of abuse.
- Nearly 50% of people with disabilities experience 10 or more abusive incidents in their lives.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported rates of sexual violence against women with disabilities of 51% to 79%.

Abuse and exploitation of people with disabilities

- Estimated that between 65% and 90% of women with disabilities have been sexually abused at some time in their lives (Reynolds, 2000, Keilty and Connelly, 2001)

- DV and other forms of abuse happen at rates significantly higher than found in general pop. (Strickler, 2001, Sobsey, 1994)
“Why doesn’t she just leave the abusive situation?”

- The question suggested some aspect of choice and personal agency
- Troubled by the question, uttered by social services providers, family members, and community members
- We had to learn from the perspective of the women more about these situations
Abuse and exploitation of people with disabilities: lack of research

- Little attention paid to the issue by researchers, social workers, service providers (Monahan and Lurie, 2003)
- “Women with disabilities have traditionally been ignored not only by those concerned about disability but also by those examining women’s experiences.” (Harding, 1987)
Curry (2002) noted that few research efforts or interventions have been targeted towards women with disabilities who have been abused, even though in a survey of women with disabilities, respondents reported that their top research and policy issues were caregiver abuse and domestic violence.
Research about people with disabilities

- Despite the penchant for data collection, the community and its major institutions know relatively little about the extent and experience of disability in the population (Fine, 1992).
- “Dearth of literature” (Monahan and Lurie, 2003) Social Workers
Abuse and exploitation of people with disabilities

While we seem to have some data about the numbers, we need a greater understanding about the experience from those who experience it.
Abuse and exploitation of people with disabilities: risk factors

- Fundamental lack of power
- Trained to be compliant
- Social, political and economic conditions
- Poverty, ethnicity, marginalized status
- Objectification
- Dual devaluation of people with disabilities and women in this culture

Abuse and exploitation of women with disabilities

- “Using disability to demean, discredit, or dismiss”
- Impact of poverty and isolation
- Lack of support following abuse - social services, law enforcement, family, community

Findings

- All participants revealed multiple incidents of violence, including rape and assault.
- All indicated being raped by family member or close friend of family between ages 8-11.
- Most of the participants (90%) have children.
- 60% had been employed at some point.
- 60% admitted to having challenges with addiction at some point.
- 60% had parents with significant addiction issues.
Findings

- All of the participants related stories of financial exploitation by family members, friends and boyfriends.
- All experienced verbal abuse, much of it related to having a disability.
Findings

All had the experience of having family members serve as representative payee for their SSI checks – now all are their own payees. This involved locating (with support) medical doctors who would attest to their abilities. This was no small matter, given their labels of intellectual disability.
What skills or personal traits helped you deal with the exploitation and abuse?

- Faith
- Having knowledge of certain legal protections - TRO
- Learning how to manage money - gave them choices, sense of control
- Skills to find and keep jobs
- Skill to ask for help from others to remove abusers from situation
- Safety planning - developing plan for leaving
Findings

What skills would have been helpful for you to have?

- Knowing how to “not be too nice”
- Knowing other options to keep abusive person away if TRO did not work
- Better jobs skills to get better jobs - lead to more money to keep phone on and secure safer housing
- Knowing how to deal with Social Security
- Literacy - reading important papers, better job options, knowing what you are signing
Findings

What kind of help did you receive from others?

- Limited responses to this question
- Brothers coming over and beating up abuser, making him leave

After accessing services at AADD:

- Assistance getting children back from DFCS
- Assistance with court matters
- Assistance locating safe housing, furniture
- Assistance with becoming payee for SSI check
Findings

Were there actions that others took that did not help you through the experience?
- Police not helpful
- DA’s office not helpful
- Housing authority officials and policies - afraid to report abuse because of possibility of eviction
- Counselors not being helpful
- Other’s perceptions of disability
- Not being believed about the abuse
Findings

Were there actions that others took that did not help you through the experience?

- Pressure from family/friends to stay in relationship (If you were a Christian….he’s really a nice person…..no one else will want you, etc)
- Men making reports to DFCS as control/abuse tactic
- Removal of children by DFCS (related to disability)
Findings

How do you think having a disability impacted the experience?

- Partners saying no other man would want them due to disability
- Assumptions made by others that you don’t know how to do anything, i.e. DFCS workers,
- Police not listening due to disability
- Family and friends minimizing or dismissing experience
- People saying they were just lucky to have a man
Findings

What would you want other women with disabilities to know to help them deal with this kind of experience?

Initially they shared the following:

- Advise not to get involved with men
- Being alone is okay
- You can’t trust anyone
- Women are not stupid
- Women with disabilities don’t deserve abuse
Findings

After participating in the support group
What did you learn?

- Advise not to get involved with men. Being alone is okay — “I can do bad by myself.”
- I can trust the women in this group — they know what it is like, “they have my back.”
- I deserve to be treated with respect.
- I did not deserve abuse.
- “Bad men are like fleas — once you got one, he is hard to get rid of. Keep them away.”
AADD
Since the group started in 2003, we have supported over 35 women who have experienced abuse
Conclusions

Greatly impacted by:
Lack of access to resources,
Attitudes of family and services providers
Lack of support
Policy issues and issues such as poverty, justice system responses
Conclusions

- Interaction with agencies, policies and systems were oppressive: DFCS, law enforcement, the courts, the Housing Authority, TANF, and the school system.
- These external forces greatly impacted the lives of the participants.
- “One Strike and You are Out” Housing Authority policies put the women at significant risk - since most of the women had children at home, they opted not to report abuse for fear of police reports and eviction.
Conclusions

- Protective orders not effective, not having a phone is very challenging
- Intermittent or pervasive poverty severely limited choices: had to rely on limited public housing options, or they had to live in unsafe neighborhoods, unable to pay to keep phone on to call for help
- Poor educational opportunities led to poor employment which led to continued poverty
Conclusions

- Lack of responsiveness by police officers, as well as refusal by DA’s to pursue prosecution was very troubling.
- DFCS involvement in removing children also problematic.
- Attitudes of family/friends about disability and minimizing/dismissing experiences very hard on the women.
Recommendations

- Increase effective and appropriate educational opportunities to enhance literacy skills
- Support location and selection of trusted people who could assist with reading if literacy training options do not work
- Increase employment skills and opportunities; locate good jobs that provide good pay and benefits
- Recognize and address impact of poverty: need access to resources, housing, funds to keep phone on
- Advocate for changes in Housing Authority policies; push for legislation that outlaws “One Strike” rules
Recommendations

- More research needs to be done: disability needs to be recognized as a risk factor and included in all research on women and violence.
- Research needs to be done on the intersection of poverty, disability and abuse.
- Impact of employment on gender, disability and abuse.
Recommendations

- Provide information on the cycle of abuse to people with disabilities
- Provide support groups to women with disabilities who have been abused
- Locate and provide information on DV resources
- Train DFCS workers, law enforcement, attorneys, judges, doctors, social workers, social services providers,
- We need to cross train DV and disability services providers
Trying to create a new normal

Women expect to be treated with respect

Children grow up seeing healthier relationships

A new pattern of interactions, a different set of expectations, a better legacy
Stories from the Field

- Linda
- Peggy
- Andrea
- Letha
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