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Research Paper

Out of the shadows: Violence against girls and women with disabilities in Portugal



Hors de l'ombre : la violence à l'égard des femmes et filles en situation de handicap au Portugal

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ABSTRACT

To live a life free from abuse and violence is a fundamental human right. Yet for many girls and women with disabilities, this remains a difficult goal to achieve. This paper examines the issue of violence against girls and women with disabilities in Portugal, by addressing three key questions: what forms of violence against girls and women with disabilities are more prevalent? How significant is the issue in Portugal? How to ensure the right of girls and women with disabilities to protection against violence? Drawing from 60 semi-structured interviews with women and men with various types of disabilities, the study reveals a high prevalence of situations of abuse among girls and women with disabilities including psychological, physical, sexual, financial and social violence. Results are discussed in light of human rights principles and suggestions are made to develop a research agenda and continue exploring the topic in the near future.

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R É S U M É

Vivre une vie sans violence est un droit humain fondamental. Mais pour beaucoup de femmes et filles en situation de handicap, cela reste un objectif difficile à réaliser. Cet article analyse la question

Mots clés :

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Droits de l'homme
Portugal

de la violence à l'égard des femmes et filles en situation de handicap au Portugal en répondant à trois questions centrales: quelles sont les formes de violence à l'égard des femmes et filles en situation de handicap? Quels sont les significations et les impacts de la violence chez les femmes et les filles en situation de handicap? Comment assurer le droit des femmes et filles en situation de handicap à la protection contre la violence? À partir de 60 interviews semi-structurées, conduites auprès de femmes et d'hommes en situation de handicap, cette recherche révèle les différentes formes de violence à l'égard des femmes et filles en situation de handicap, y compris la violence psychologique, physique, sexuelle, financière et sociale. Les résultats sont discutés à la lumière des principes de droits de l'homme et des suggestions pour un agenda de recherche future sont présentées.

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1. Introduction

To live a life free from abuse and violence is a fundamental human right. Yet for many girls and women with disabilities, this remains a difficult goal to achieve. Indeed, research indicates that violence against women with disabilities is not only more frequent but also more complex and diverse in nature than violence against women in general (Alriksson-Schmidt, Armour, & Thibadeau, 2010; Barret, O'Day, Roche, & Carlson, 2009; Breiding & Armour, 2015; Frazão, Silva, Norton, & Magalhães, 2014; Khalief, Howard, Osborn, & Jhonson, 2013; Lin, Lin, Lin, Wu Li, & Kuo, 2010; Rosen, 2006). The factors that contribute to the increased vulnerability of girls and women with disabilities—e.g. the social isolation in which many of them live, the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness they experience, their dependency on caregivers—reflect the intersection of gender and disability and translate the impact of structural relations of poverty and social devaluation on these girls and women, at both the family and the societal level. These same factors explain the great difficulty that women and girls with disabilities find to get support and assistance when they are victims of violence (Lightfoot & Williams, 2009; Thiara, Hague, & Mullender, 2011).

The recent adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, of which Portugal is a signatory, recognizes that women and girls with disabilities face multiple discrimination (Article 6) and reaffirms the obligation of States parties to protect them from all forms of abuse and violence (Article 15). Like all women, many women with disabilities are victims of violence at the hands of their intimate partners and close relatives. Yet in unique ways, violence against girls and women with disabilities is also perpetrated by their caregivers (formal and informal, male and female), service providers, other service-users (particularly in residential settings) and the general population. Moreover, when committed in institutions, violence tends to remain invisible, as behaviours and practices that are not illegal but which nevertheless violate the clients' dignity and rights, are usually tolerated and even considered normal (INWWD, 2004).

While the topic of disability and gender violence is getting growing attention within the international literature, little is known about the phenomenon in the Portuguese context. The Portuguese State is party to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities since 2009 but disability policy in Portugal has remained largely gender-blind (Pinto, 2011a), which has contributed to maintain this issue on the shadows. It becomes, therefore, interesting to start understanding the scale and scope of the problem in this country, in order to draw recommendations for future research and policy development. This paper addresses this challenge.

In what follows, I propose to begin this exploration, by addressing three key questions:

- What factors create the added vulnerability of girls and women with disabilities to violence?
- What forms of violence are prevalent?
- How significant is the issue in Portugal?

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