



UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND



Access to Specialised Victim Support Services for Women with Disabilities Who Have Experienced Violence

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Guidelines for identifying good practices examples of barrier free access to specialized victim support services

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1. Best, good or promising practices

This short report is a part of a two year research project financed by the Daphne Funding Programme of the European Commission. The guidelines and criteria in the report were developed by the participating research teams in collaboration with stakeholders and advisory group participants. The guidelines aim to assist in identifying and developing good practice examples in specialised support services for women with disabilities who have experienced violence.

The terms 'best', 'good' or 'promising' are most often used when describing interventions or programs that are considered 'good' or 'best' according to some indicators or criteria. It is important to emphasise that such a description is a strong claim and even stronger to claim that such criteria or indicators will work or be applicable in different locations and for different individuals, especially when considering a highly heterogeneous group like women with disabilities. Therefore, it is important to exercise caution in making any claims about the applicability or transferability of 'best practices' across individuals, groups and countries. There are no uncontested principles for 'good' or 'best' practices in any area. When considering transferability of 'good practice' most 'models' need to be changed and adapted when moved from one context to another.

Having voiced this caution we will proceed to list some of the principles and guidelines, indicators and criteria that can be helpful in identifying good practice examples of barrier free access to specialized victim support services for women with disabilities based on data from our research projects.

2. Guiding principles for ‘good practice’ in specialised service provision

Some of the important guiding principles in specialised support services for women with disabilities who have experienced violence are listed below. These can be among the indicators to identify ‘good practices’. If services work according to these principles they will meet some of the criteria for ‘good practice’.

- **Human rights:** Specialised support services should reflect the CRPD, current knowledge and human rights standards with regards to women with disabilities.
- **Social-relational understanding of disability:** Support for and work with women with disabilities should be grounded in the social-relational understanding of disability as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities CRPD.
- **Listening to women with disabilities:** Advisors should believe the stories and experiences of disabled women and begin there – not from the point of view of ‘specialists’. Furthermore, they should use these experiences to inform development of provisions and services.
- **Respecting self-determination:** Specialised support services should take care that the work is grounded on the will and preferences of the women with disabilities. They must be aware of the subordinate status of women with disabilities in society and knowledgeable about methods that counter a common power imbalance between advisors and survivors of violence.
- **Confidentiality and respect for privacy:** Confidentiality is important for women with disabilities who seek assistance – also for those women who may have their legal capacity questioned or removed. If there are legal limits to confidentiality it must be clear from the outset.
- **Safe space:** Specialised support services for women with disabilities should be safe spaces. It is important to note that “safe space” may be defined in different ways by different groups of women and so it is important that safe space should be defined as such by women with disabilities. In order to be a safe space, services must address discrimination and harassment against disabled women within their services.
- **Self-empowerment:** Specialised support services should strive to promote self-empowerment of women with disabilities and offer a range of options/ methods for women to build on their strengths.
- **Accessibility:** Support offered by specialised support services should be accessible to women with different impairments. Services should ensure accessibility as defined by Art.9 in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
- **Diversity:** Specialised support services must recognise the diversity within the population of women with disability.
- **Employment of women with disabilities:** Specialised support services should include women with disabilities at all levels of the organisation, including decision-making.
- **Partnership and participation:** Support services should work in equal partnerships with disabled women and listen to women’s expertise. They should adhere to the principle “nothing about us without us”.

- **Knowledge about violence particular to disabled women:** Support services must understand and recognise that although women with disabilities face the same violence as other women (i.e. domestic and sexual violence, forced marriage etc.) they are likely to face additional forms of violence related to their disability.
- **Holistic view:** Specialised support services should promote the women's overall health and well-being and physical and emotional safety.
- **Individual approach:** Support services should use individualised approach when supporting women, as women with disabilities have different needs.
- **Recognise women with different conditions:** Support services should recognise that some groups of women (e.g. women with autism; D/deaf women) may or may not identify as having impairments but need purposeful measures to ensure the accessibility of services. They should be knowledgeable about the particular situation and requirements of these women and work in partnership with individuals or respective organisations.

3. Criteria for identifying 'good practices' in the provision of specialised support services for women with disabilities

Does the specialised support service strive towards or practice the following?

Accessibility

1. Is the support service pro-active in reaching out to women with disabilities, keeping in touch and offering on-going support? Does it offer outreach through hotlines, web-based counselling or other such services with the aim of reaching all women?
2. Does the support service ensure that their facilities are accessible to the range of women with disabilities and meet their diverse needs (physical accessibility, assistive communication, access to interpreters etc.)?
3. Does the support service provide accessible information about their services (e.g. information in accessible forms on internet or pamphlets)?
4. Does the support service ensure technical accessibility that meets the diverse needs of women with disabilities? For example, does it ensure necessary safety equipment and precautions to meet the needs of women with different impairments (e.g. visual fire signals for deaf women and precautions that meet the needs of women with autism)?
5. Does the support service welcome women with disabilities as a part of a diverse group of women or are they seen as 'difficult', 'too much work' or 'hard to work with'? Does it take measures to ensure staff to have positive attitudes towards disabled women seeking help?
6. Does the support service ensure reasonable adjustment and flexibility in their services to meet the needs of women with disabilities (e.g. take the time needed for effective communication)?

Knowledge/awareness

7. Does the support service address the range of different types of violence that are particular to women with disabilities?
8. Is there knowledge within the service about the particular social situation of women with disabilities (e.g. the profound prejudice many of them face), the most common disability related context (e.g. frequency and prevalence of violence) and is it grounded in the social-relational understanding of disability?
9. Does the support service promote disability awareness by providing ongoing training to workers on all levels of the support services about disability related issues and violence that is particular to disabled women. Is the training grounded on the social – relational understanding of disability? Is the training delivered by women with disabilities?
10. Does the support service integrate the needs of women with disabilities into their policies and practices (mainstreaming) or are services and access for women with disabilities considered on an as needed basis?
11. Does the support service challenge limiting social structures and conditions which discriminate against women with disability?

Self-empowerment

12. Does the support service ensure provisions that are self-empowering and inclusive which women with disabilities value highly, such as self-help groups and peer support?
13. Does the service support disabled women to secure a safe home of their own and ensure independent living support and assistance to develop skills as needed?

Participation

14. Does the support service employ women with disabilities?
15. Does the service have a commitment to career/leadership development of disabled women (e.g. training, facilitating involvement, support for participation).
16. Does the specialised support service collaborate equally with user led organisations/ interest groups/activists and disabled women?
17. When the support service decides to introduce a new service (project) for disabled women, are disabled women involved in its development and delivery?

Diversity

18. Does the service address the experiences and needs of disabled women from diverse communities (e.g. lesbian women, trans women, Black and Minority Ethnic women, migrant and refugee women)?

4. Access to justice – ‘good practice’ criteria

Good practice criteria from the perspective of specialised support service providers

1. Do women with disabilities receive education and training about their rights or are they assisted to seek such education?
2. Are women with disabilities educated about the dynamics of violence or assisted in seeking such education?
3. Are women with disabilities supported by the service in gaining access to justice through formal complaint mechanisms, reporting the crime to the police, are interpreters available, etc.?
4. Does the service include legal counselling for women with disabilities?
5. Does the support service promote access to justice for women with disabilities by providing ongoing training to workers on all levels concerning legislation on violence against women, formal complaint mechanisms, legal counselling and access to compensation?

General criteria for good practices regarding access to justice

1. Are there formal complaint mechanisms for women with disabilities who have been violated?
2. Have police officers, lawyers, prosecutors and judges received training in the area of disability and violence against women with disabilities in order to strengthen the position of women with disabilities as reliable witnesses in order to ensure that women with disabilities are regarded as credible when they report a crime or in court?
3. Are alternative methods and ways of communication regarded as acceptable (e.g. by police, courts, etc.) and equally credible as conventional ways of communication when women with disabilities report violence?
4. Are women with disabilities entitled to free legal assistance prior and during criminal proceedings?
5. Is the access to existing schemes of legal assistance for women with disabilities ensured?
6. Are women with disabilities entitled to free psycho-social assistance during court proceedings?
7. Is access to compensation ensured by for instance a compensation-fund for victims of crime or legal/psycho-social assistance during civil proceedings?
8. Is the legislation on violence against women (e.g. specific legal act against domestic violence) applicable and applied in practice to women with disabilities living in institutions or care?
9. Is there any form of institutionalised communication between police and service providers in case violence against women with disabilities is reported to the police?