

Life after Violence

A study on how women with intellectual disabilities cope with institutional violence

www.life-after-violence.eu

First Findings in the Netherlands

Institutional violence

Violence is very prevalent in residential institutions. Perpretrators can be staff members, people with disabilities living there, or outside people.

Many institutions have procedures on how to deal with violence. However, these procedures are part of the institutional culture and seem to be inadequate for the people concerned. They lead also to an underreporting of cases of abuse to the authorities.

Violence against women with intellectual disabilities

Women in institutions are experiencing various specific forms of abuse.

They are often not taken seriously when they complain. Inadequate sex education, power imbalance and lack of empowerment limit their capacity to protect themselves from violence.

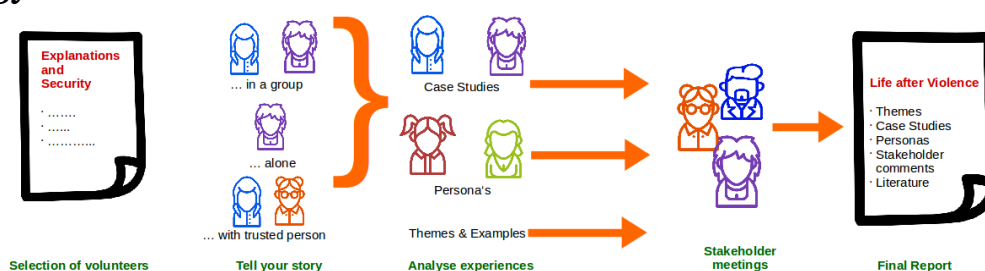
Coping strategies

Women with intellectual disability develop their own strategies to cope with experiences of violence and abuse. Most often, these strategies include passive behaviour, keeping abuse secret and trying „not to be difficult“. These strategies can become dysfunctional out of institution and complicate life in the community.

Effects on living in the community

Women are terrified to be sent back to institutions. Even after many years in the community they realistically assume that they may be sent back if they “present a problem” in the eyes of others. Together with dysfunctional coping strategies this has a very negative effect on their quality of life.

Methodology



Desk research

- The government of the Netherlands has defined ‘behaviour that crosses boundaries’: neglect, psychological and emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, financial and material abuse, discrimination and violation of rights.
- An umbrella organisation of care-providers reports that there are hundreds of reports of sexual abuse per year through the inspection for care.
- Violence can be reported with local anti-discrimination offices. It is rare that women with an intellectual disability report violence here. Only an estimated 12% of cases is reported.
- Most studies focus primarily on sexual abuse. Women are far more likely to be sexually abused (61% for women against 23% for men).
- Only in two studies were people with intellectual disability asked about their experiences. These women reported many more instances of violence than their caretakers.

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When I disagreed with something or if I got angry I was put in isolation. For me it was horrible and I used to panic. Before going into isolation, they made me change into clothes I couldn't tear. Two people would watch as I got changed. This was very humiliating. If I wasn't fast enough, they would 'help' me. I hated this, because suddenly they would both be touching me while I had no clothes on.

Women with intellectual disabilities are especially vulnerable in institutional settings. They seem to have more restrictions and less possibilities to defend themselves. Due to inadequate sex education and lack of empowerment, they also have less possibilities to defend themselves. This also leads to a very significant under-reporting of abuse and violence that takes place in institutions.

When someone was ill in the institution, they still had to go to work. You were always sent, because there was no-one to take care of you.

When I left the institution I would still go to work when I was ill. I thought I would lose my job when I was ill and have to go back to the institution. I love my work, it is everything to me. I am still scared that I will lose my place due to my health. Even after 10 years.

Women with intellectual disabilities value very much the possibility to live included in the community. They would do almost anything to maintain this status. However, they are left alone in dealing with the trauma of violence and abuse experienced during many years of institutionalisation. Our project will raise attention about this situation and develop proposals for possible supports.

Institutionalisation is a form of violence in itself. Standard institutional rules and practices are understood by clients as threats or make them feel very uncomfortable. "Being sent to the psychologist" was understood by women as a punishment rather than as a help or therapy. It was often synonymous with getting (stronger) medication or receiving unwanted attention. Living conditions make inmates very vulnerable to abuse by staff or fellow inmates.

I was sexually abused. One therapist touched me during one of my epileptic episodes. He didn't know I could still feel and hear everything. He said: "I will help you get over your trauma". I have never told this to anyone before. They will not believe me anyway. The only thing they would do is send me back to the institution. I do not want any men near me when I am having an episode. It takes me a long time to trust anyone.

People with intellectual disabilities in institutions are very aware of their situation and develop strategies to cope. Hoarding of items that are not readily available is just one example. Trying not to attract unwanted attention is also a common coping strategy. Research has often demonstrated that institutionalised behaviour is very common. It is obvious, that such strategies persist when living in the community and can become dysfunctional.

I am still scared that I will be sent back to the institution. I do not believe that I am allowed to stay in a place where I actually like it. I like where I am now. I like my work too. But I often think it will all be taken from me. This makes me very insecure. I am always surprised when I am allowed to stay.