

## People with disability and impairment

Predominantly **women** with disability and impairment are significantly more likely than other women to experience domestic and family violence; and the violence is more likely to be serious, experienced differently, and extend for longer periods of time [Frawlet et al 2015]. Australian research identifies a range of factors that contribute to this vulnerability and a victim's capacity to seek the assistance they need. These factors relate to the nature of the victim's disability or impairment, the extent to which the victim is dependent on the perpetrator, and general community attitudes and approaches to people with disability and impairment.

A person may experience disability or impairment as physical, sensory, or cognitive impairment [NSWLRC 2012], or a complex intersection of some or all of these conditions. When also a victim of domestic and family violence, they may not be aware of or understand their legal rights and protections, or they may be prevented from accessing support services where the physical environment does not accommodate their needs. Support workers may not have the skills to assist the victim to communicate effectively, or support service information may not be offered in a format that the victim can use or at a location the victim can access. People with disability or impairment may also have a **low level of literacy or may be illiterate**.

Victims with disability or impairment who require support from, or depend on, their partner, the perpetrator, for their daily needs and care may be especially vulnerable to domestic and family violence. [George & Harris 2014] For example, the perpetrator may deny or restrict the victim's access to their transport or mobility aid, medication or other means of disability support; or fail to help the victim on or off the toilet, or to adequately wash or nourish the victim. The perpetrator may injure, threaten to injure or immobilise an **assistance animal** that the victim is reliant on for independence; or interfere with the victim's **reproductive health** and choices by imposing measures to control menstruation, force infertility or terminate pregnancy. The perpetrator may also, through physically and emotionally **isolating** behaviours and threats, act as a gatekeeper to the victim's attempts to disclose the violence and seek assistance from support services. People with disability or impairment may be more likely to delay seeking help or reporting violence for fear of losing the perpetrator's support [Harpur & Douglas 2015].

While the research is limited, there is evidence indicating that where, in a previously non-violent relationship, one partner develops a disability through, for example, brain injury or Multiple Sclerosis, there is a risk that the other partner may begin to demonstrate domestic and family violence behaviours towards them [Bagshaw et al 2000].

General community attitudes and approaches to people with disability and impairment may impact on how a victim experiences domestic and family violence. Stereotypical notions of, for example, a woman with disability or impairment as either not having sexual feelings or being hypersexual, incapable of sustaining relationships, or unable to control herself may result in the woman's actual circumstances and needs being overlooked, or the woman being blamed for the violence. Reportedly, when **disclosing** their experiences of violence, women with disability or impairment are less likely to be believed, and when giving evidence in court, their competency, reliability and credibility are more likely to be questioned or given less weight [ [Dimopoulos & Fenge 2013](#)]. Their fear of prejudicial assessment or discrimination may cause women with disability or impairment to be less likely to access support services or engage with police or **judicial processes**.

Perpetrators of domestic and family violence may also experience disability or impairment, which may affect the nature and severity of the violence, how it is experienced by the victim, and the appropriate judicial responses. A US study revealed a high level of learning disabilities and mental ill health among perpetrators compared with other offenders [[Stewart & Power 2014](#)].