

HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELLBEING: WOMEN & DISABILITY

Issue/Problem	<p>Inequality and discrimination of disabled women in regards to sexuality and motherhood.</p> <p>Lack of knowledge on issues relevant to the lives of disabled women in Northern Ireland.</p>
Evidence Base (Equality & Inequalities Report)	<p>Sexuality and motherhood are two of disabled women's greatest concerns. Research by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland highlights that many disabled women have particular difficulty in accessing key services such as reproductive health care and screening.</p> <p><i>Ref: Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2003) cited in "Equality and Inequalities in Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland: A Statistical Overview (DHSSPS, 2004:125).</i></p>
Evidence Base (Literature Review)	<p>Much of the available research and literature on women with disabilities tends to be derived from national and international sources. There is significant evidence for the need for more research into the lives of disabled women in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>The US Centre for Research on Women with Disabilities (CROWD)¹ identifies a comprehensive range of issues which upon the lives of disabled women including the fact that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ disabled women are more likely to have low levels of physical activity in comparison to non-disabled women.▪ obesity and weight management are significant problem for many disabled women.▪ women with disabilities tend to have higher rates of depression that non-disabled women.▪ little is know about the effects of the menopause or the treatment of its symptoms on disabling chronic conditions. <p>In terms of sexual and reproductive health CROWD highlight that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ there is a lack of information on safe and effective contraception for disabled women.▪ there is a lack of information on the fertility problems experienced by disabled women.▪ disabled women are more likely to be forced or pressurised into

Inequalities and Unfair Access Issues Emerging from the DHSSPS (2004) “Equality and Inequalities in Health and Social Care: A Statistical Overview” Report

unnecessary abortions, sterilisations and hysterectomies.

- disabled women are less likely to receive information on **sexual and reproductive health** (including information on STIs, safe sex practices and effective birth control).
- disabled women experience barriers to **obstetrical and gynaecological services** and are less likely to receive breast or cervical screening (partly due to inappropriate or inaccessible medical equipment).
- disabled women tend to have negative experiences in **pregnancy and childbirth** due to difficulties locating health care providers and facilities with the knowledge and equipment to manage pregnancy and childbirth in women with disabilities.
- services for women suffering sexual abuse or domestic violence, such as women’s refuges or counselling services, are largely unable to accommodate the needs of disabled women².

A recent report by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland³ confirms many of these findings. In addition to the issues already highlighted the report notes how many disabled women experience difficulty in accessing appropriate pre and postnatal care. The report also suggests that disabled women are often denied the opportunity to form relationships or have children.

Particular sub-groups of disabled women (e.g. older disabled women, disabled lesbian and bisexual women and disabled women from black and minority ethnic communities) may face additional discrimination and inequity in access to services. Issues which are problematic for non-disabled women such as low income or inaccessible transport are exacerbated for disabled women⁴.

Is the issue/problem being addressed by current or proposed strategies and policies? On what level?

One of the key objectives of the Northern Ireland [Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability](#) is to recommend specific reforms of services for a number of key user groups. One of these groups includes women with mental health or learning disabilities. The recommended service reforms will specify models of care and standards of provision (in relation to the comprehensiveness, effectiveness, accessibility and acceptability of services). They will include detailed consideration of primary and secondary care services, the interface between these services, the linkages and interfaces between health and social care, education, culture arts and leisure, employment and housing, the complementary roles of statutory and non-statutory services, and the issues surrounding multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working⁵. It is hoped that the outcome of the review will improve services for women in Northern Ireland with mental health and learning disabilities.

Other key developments which may have a positive impact upon the lives of disabled women include:

- the development of a [strategy for disabled people](#), led by

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OFMDFM, to improve the rights of people with disabilities in Northern Ireland

- the development of a [single bill of rights](#) for Northern Ireland which will harmonise and update existing anti-discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland.
- the publication of a [gender impact assessment](#) handbook produced by the Gender Equality Unit of OFMDFM which aims to assist government departments in assessing their policies and practices to see whether they will effect men and women differently. The handbook *may* assist in identifying discrimination and gaps in service provision for disabled women.
- in regards to the development of a gender equality strategy for Northern Ireland - many of the consultation respondents to “[Gender Matters](#)” recommend that the focus of any new gender strategy should cover marginalised women such as women with disabilities.
- as part of their Section 75 duties, DHSSPS, HSS Boards, Trusts and other statutory health and social care bodies have provided [disability awareness training](#) (including briefings on the Disability Discrimination Act) to HPSS staff.
- the promotion of [user forums](#) to promote communication between disabled service users and statutory service providers.

Despite these developments, the Equality Commissions’ report on disabled women argues that in order to achieve equality there is still significant work to be done in eliminating the disadvantages faced by disabled women in Northern Ireland. The Equality Commission report highlights that disabled women tend to derive much of their support from other disabled people, and other disabled women in particular.

Is the problem amenable to further intervention by the DHSSPS or other?

- Statutory health and social care bodies in association with relevant disability groups and disabled people themselves should develop a health promotion initiative and public awareness campaign specifically targeted at both disabled men and women.
- Statutory health and social care bodies should develop information on disability and sexual health. This should include information on contraception and other issues such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Information should be available in a range of different formats and for a range of disabilities.
- Workshops and information sessions for people with disabilities on sexual and reproductive health should be delivered in different settings (day centres, health centres, social clubs etc). People with disabilities must be involved in both the design and delivery of such services.
- A review and needs assessment of disabled women in relation to gynaecological and obstetric care should be conducted. This should include a review of medical equipment (e.g. examination tables, mammography equipment etc).

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- A review of the experiences of disabled women in relation to pre and postnatal care and identify areas for improvement should be conducted.
- Statutory health and social care bodies in co-operation with other relevant statutory bodies and the voluntary and community sectors should explore ways of addressing the needs of disabled women in relation to domestic abuse.
- Provide support for Disabled Women’s projects which address issues such as social exclusion, isolation and empowerment of disabled women.

¹ see CROWD website <http://www.bcm.edu/crowd/>

² Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (1995) *The Experiences of Disabled Women*. Social Policy Research 81. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

³ Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. (2003) *Disabled Women in Northern Ireland: Situation, Experiences and Identity*. Belfast: Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (1995) *op cit*.

⁵ Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability. A Strategic Framework for Mental Health and Learning Disability. <http://www.rmhdni.gov.uk/strategic.asp>