

The invisible victims

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Abstract.

This paper addresses the issue of sexual and gender-based violence against women with disabilities and argues that the intersections of disability, gender and violence requires further research, commitment and attention in the global fight for gender equality and women's empowerment. It emphasizes how women with disabilities are often excluded from the discourse on violence against women. Finally, this paper intends to address some of the consequences that could arise when women with disabilities are denied equal participation in the discourse on sexual and gender-based violence.

Key-words.

Intersectionality, Disability, Gender-based Violence, Exclusion, Public Discourse on Violence against Women

Resumen.

Este ensayo aborda el tema de la violencia sexual y de género contra las mujeres con discapacidad y sostiene que las intersecciones entre discapacidad, género y violencia requieren más investigación, compromiso y atención en la lucha mundial por la igualdad de género y el empoderamiento de las mujeres. Enfatiza cómo las mujeres con discapacidad a menudo son excluidas del discurso sobre la violencia contra la mujer. Finalmente, este ensayo pretende abordar algunas de las consecuencias que podrían surgir cuando a las mujeres con discapacidad se les niega la participación equitativa en el discurso sobre la violencia sexual y de género.

Palabras clave.

Interseccionalidad, Discapacidad, Violencia de género, Exclusión, Discurso público sobre la violencia contra mujeres

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Introduction

The years of 2017 and 2018 represented a significant milestone in the global fight against sexual violence against women. An online social media campaign against sexual harassment and sexual assault went viral, and it soon became a global phenomenon (Wildman, 2019). The movement often referred to as the “me too” movement or simply #metoo, brought global attention to the sexual violence and harassment women in every corner of the world face and it encouraged women across the world to speak up. Women in more than 85 countries shared their stories of harassment online using the ‘metoo’ hashtag (Powell, 2017). It was a remarkable confirmation of how powerful online social mobilization could be. Despite the overwhelming response to the campaign as well as praise from women’s groups and feminists around the world, the movement was criticized for excluding an important group from the debate: women with disabilities (Regulska, 2018; The Guardian, 2016).

Estimations suggest that approximately one billion people worldwide are living with some form of disability and 19% of those are women over the age of 18 (UN Women, 2019). Women living with disabilities are also according to multiple studies more likely to become victims of violence than women without disabilities (Ferres, Megias & Exposito, 2013). In a study from Cambodia, 52% reported emotional violence while 25,4% reported physical abuse. A study from India showed that 25% of women with intellectual impairment had been raped and 6% of women with disabilities had been sterilized (Mac-Seing& Boggs 2014). Moreover, research on this topic is limited, particularly on the intersections of disability, gender and violence. In many regions of the world, being a woman is not only challenging on multiple fronts, but it can also be dangerous. The prevalence of violence against women is still staggeringly high, and systemic gender inequality and societal prejudice is denying millions of women and girls their basic human rights. Women and girls living with disabilities are even more vulnerable (Van Der Heijden et.al, 2018). These women are often the invisible victims of violence, and face discrimination, harassment and stigma based on two reasons: for being a woman and for having a disability.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Disability

What do we mean when we speak about violence against women with disabilities? Is this type of violence different from the one inflicted on women without disabilities, or is it the same? And perhaps most importantly, what do we mean by “a woman with disability”? To be able to answer these questions, and understand how violence and disability are often interlinked and reciprocal, it is necessary to have a clear and precise understanding of how these terms are often defined and their implications. Two very value-laden subjects comprise the theme of this paper: violence against women on the one hand and disability on the other. These are two subjects, that will have different connotations and implications depending on the discourse (Harpur, 2012). Cultural and societal understandings of these terms vary. The use of language also has implications; how disability is discussed and which words and terms are used will influence how it is interpreted. Some will argue that using the word “disability” has a negative influence on the debate, and that the term does not take into consideration the identity of the people in question nor the diversity within this group. A person is much more than their disability, or their diagnosis, and language can reinforce incorrect and stereotypical attitudes



towards them (Harpur, 2012:327-330). On the other hand, “disability” is an umbrella term for a wide range of different physical and psychological impairments, and the term therefore implicate that the persons in question are not ‘disabled’ but rather that they are persons living with a disability. Still, definitions are often contentious and particularly those who are being ‘defined’ may interpret them differently than others (Harpur, 2012:327-330). The following definitions below adopted by the United Nations will be used in order to explain the two terms that make up the basis for this paper. In 1979, the United Nations adopted the *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), a treaty that is often referred to as the bill of rights for women (UN Women, 2019). The treaty defines violence against women as the following:

Article 1

For the purposes of this Declaration, the term “violence against women” means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

Article 2

Violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not be limited to, the following:

(a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;

(b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution;

(c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs.

CEDAW was, and still is, an historical milestone in the continuous global struggle to achieve gender equality and ensure women’s human rights. Yet, discrimination and violence against women and girls is still one of the most serious and prevalent violations of human rights worldwide. According to the United Nation’s Population Fund (UNDP), 1 in 3 women have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, estimations suggest that approximately one billion people worldwide are living with some form of disability and 19% of those are women over the age of 18 (UN Women, 2019). The term “disability” is a multidimensional term (Harpur 2012:326) it will have different connotations depending on the observer. Societal and cultural understandings of disability differ, and there is no universal definition (Harpur 2012:326). The United Nations adopted the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) in 2006 and the convention is intended as a human rights instrument with an explicit framework for the protection and rights of people with disabilities (UN, 2019). Article 1 of the convention states that:

“The purpose of the present Convention is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. Persons with disabilities include those who



have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (UN, 2019).

In other words, disability is an umbrella term that can be used to describe various forms of impairments. Living with a disability is also a condition most people in the world will experience at one time or the other. Disability can be temporary or long-term. In disability studies, there are two main ‘models’ used to discuss disability, namely the medical model and the social model (Shakespeare, 2006:197). The medical model views disability as a functional impairment that prevents the body to function in the manner it is supposed to. This model understands disability as a problem that affects the person in question and no one else. In contrast, the social model draws on the idea that it is society that disables people and creates barriers for persons with disabilities. The social model would see it as the responsibility of society to reduce and remove such barriers, rather than the persons with disabilities (Shakespeare, 2006: 197-199).

Unfortunately, in many parts of the world the medical model is the dominant perception of disabilities. This perception of disability has influenced how people view and understand it for centuries, even before it became a term in disability studies. ‘Ableism’ and ableist views are based on the similar understanding that people with a form of disability deviates from the “norm”, and is therefore considered inferior to the able-bodied (Harpur, 2012:332). In countries that allows abortion, this is for instance evident in the discussion of disability-selective abortions and prenatal and genetic testing (Fox, 2009). Fetuses can be checked for physical or intellectual impairments, for instance Down syndrome, and in many countries this testing have become routine. Ethicists have warned that this is problematic, as it sends a stigmatizing message to society,

as well as to people with disabilities, that children with disabilities are ‘unwanted’. Moreover, it can also influence women’s choice to not have an abortion if the fetus is expected to have a form of impairment and feel pressured to do so (Saxton, 2009:105). In other words, ableist views do not necessarily have to be directly and explicitly expressed orally towards people with disabilities but are in many ways internalized in societies and cultures.

Double Discrimination

Women with disabilities are considered a high-risk group for sexual and gender-based violence due to the intersection of gender bias and disability discrimination (Van Der Heijden et al., 2018). Sexual and gender-based violence is both a cause and a consequence of disability; it is reciprocal. As described by CEDAW, sexual and gender-based violence is a worldwide phenomenon, and it refers to a form of violence directed against a person based on gender. The term is often used interchangeably with “violence against women” or “sexual violence”. It includes physical, sexual, verbal and psychological abuse, as well as educational and economic deprivation. The prevalence of this type of violence around the world is a symptom of the systemic gender inequality experienced by women worldwide, often regardless of geography, socio-economic background, ethnicity or religion. Yet, women with disabilities are two to four times more likely to experience violence than women without disabilities (Dunkle et. al, 2018).

Around the world are women and girls with disabilities denied their sexual and reproductive rights, access to health care, access to employment and equal opportunities, education and social life (Dunkle et. al, 2018). They are often stigmatized and discriminated in their societies, and therefore already face obstacles and prejudice from an early age. These stigmatizations and social norms



accepting ableist views as well as gender bias could lead to violence. According to Ortoleva & Lewis, women and girls often face stronger barriers in preventing or resisting abuse than others depending on their situation and form of disability. In some countries, religious and cultural traditions view disability as a punishment for sin or even as a symbol of 'evil' (Ortoleva & Lewis, 2012:12). Stereotypes and social representations of disability and gender also influence the attitudes in society towards these women. Women with disabilities are often viewed as asexual and unattractive as the dominant perception of 'beauty' is free from 'deformities'. Such negative stereotypes not only reinforce the incorrect assumptions of women with disabilities but also lead to further stigmatization, which in turn could lead to low self-esteem with the women in question. In other words, being female and having a disability is in most parts of the world a two-fold challenge (Ortoleva & Lewis, 2012:12-16).

The years of 2017 and 2018 were significant symbolic years in the fight for women's rights and empowerment (Regulska, 2018). The #MeToo campaign that started out as a response to sexual harassment in the workplace, in this case in Hollywood and the film industry, ended up becoming a worldwide social movement. The campaign reached countries on every continent, and was welcomed by millions of women of different religions, socio-economic status, ethnicity and cultures. Women were defining what sexual harassment, violence and abuse meant for them, and they shared their stories from across the globe. Despite the overwhelming success of the campaign, it was criticized for its lack in diversity, particularly for excluding the most marginalized groups of women including those with disabilities (Regulska, 2018). According to multiple women's groups, women with disabilities are often excluded from the discourse concerning their rights and empowerment as well as in the actual projects and activism. On the other hand, women

with disabilities have accused women's groups of doing exactly the same. If women with disabilities are not represented in women's groups, campaigns and institutions, and invited to participate, they risk becoming invisible in the debate and thus forgotten (The Guardian, 2016; Daily Beast, 2014).

Disability, Gender and Violence

How is there a link between disability, gender and violence? Women with disabilities, both physical and/or physiological, often face a two-fold challenge; they are first of all women, and they are living with a disability that often puts them in a vulnerable position. Some women are living in more precarious situations, for instance women living in developing countries or in conflict areas, but also those living in developed countries and areas deemed safe, will be vulnerable and likely to experience discrimination and/or violence. Discrimination against people with disability and ableist views are unfortunately still dominant in most parts of the world. It can be discreet and indirect, or it can be systemic and internalized by a society. It can also be unintentional, and based on the societal norm that value 'perfection' and the able-bodied. This is evident for instance in the discussion of disability-selective abortion and prenatal testing.

On the one hand, this is a women's right issue, with the right to choose, and on the other hand, it is an issue of disability stigmatization. Women's groups and activists are advocating for women with disabilities' sexual and reproductive rights and empowerment of all women, and also EDtheir right to choose. But many of them are advocating in countries that allow for disability-selective abortions and prenatal testing, often an issue advocated by women's groups, and in societies that value the able-bodied. This creates a strange paradox and could be one plausible explanation as to why women with disabilities feel excluded and ignored by women's groups and campaigns like "metoo".



Violence against women is often used to describe physical violence but it comes in many forms, and the definition by CEDAW stresses that violence against women is a multidimensional issue. The obvious type of violence is the physical one but it usually goes hand in hand with emotional and psychological violence. Women with disabilities who are victims of violence are often subjected to it because of their disability and because of their gender. They may be more vulnerable to it if they are unable to resist or understand what is happening, and they may be unable to ask for help or tell someone. Additionally, if the person committing the abuse is a caretaker, family member or someone close to them, it could be even harder for them to report it, as they could be dependent on this person. Moreover, their gender could also prevent them from protection and justice. Gender bias is a harsh reality for millions of women and despite the impressive global improvements in regards to women's rights and their protection, millions still face obstacles, harassment and discrimination.

In some cultures and societies, violence against girls and women is more accepted than in others, and in some of those, disability is seen as a punishment for sin or as a symbol of evil. This combination could be catastrophic for the women in question. In other words, the protection of women with disabilities should be a priority for women's groups and activists. Including and encouraging these women to speak up, and advocate for their protection and social justice, could give them the strength and confidence to actually do so, as well as serve as a deterrent to the abusers. In order to prevent violence against women with disabilities, they have to be given a platform and they must be included in the fight for their own empowerment. They must be welcomed and included, and if the women's movement is to actually succeed, it must represent the diversity that makes up half the population of this world: all women.

Conclusion

The intersections of disability, gender and violence are a result of systemic gender bias and disability discrimination that has produced an acceptance of violence towards women with disabilities. These women are stigmatized and discriminated against because of their disability and because of their gender. They are often invisible due to their circumstances but also due to societal prejudice against disability. Most societies in the world value the 'normal', and societal norms and traditions view disability as a burden or something that needs to be 'fixed'. This type of ableist views contributes to hinder the protection and rights of women with disabilities in various ways, and it also increases the likelihood of them becoming victims of violence. As seen in the last couple of years, women are defining what sexual violence is and means for them, and they are taking a stand against it. They have demanded to be heard and the success of the movement is giving millions of women more confidence as well as tools to challenge the systemic gender bias worldwide. This movement needs to include all groups of women, especially those who might face more obstacles demanding their place in it. The link between disability, gender and violence must be a priority in this fight and the more it is understood, the more successful the movement will become. More research, attention and commitment to the protection of women with disabilities is absolutely imperative if we are to achieve gender equality and ensure women's empowerment worldwide.



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