



# RESEARCH POLICY BRIEF

## Triple Jeopardy: Violence against women with disabilities in Cambodia

### Defining the problem

Women with disabilities experience much higher levels of violence around the world than women without disabilities. They suffer worse physical and mental health outcomes as a consequence of violence, and are at increased risk of experiencing high levels of stigma, discrimination and other rights violations. Yet little precise disability- and sex-disaggregated data on interpersonal violence exists for the Asia-Pacific region. *Triple Jeopardy*, a three-year research project, sought to provide comparative information about the lives of women with disabilities and those without in Cambodia.

### KEY MESSAGES

- **Women with disabilities in Cambodia experience higher levels of controlling behaviours from partners, and significantly higher levels of all forms of violence (emotional, physical and sexual) from family members compared to other women.**
- **Women with disabilities who participated in this study recorded prevalence rates of family violence statistically higher than non-disabled women:**
  - 52.5% reported emotional abuse
  - 25.4% reported physical violence
  - 5.7% reported sexual violence from family members.
- **Women with disabilities experienced higher levels of psychological distress than other women, irrespective of exposure to violence.**
- **Barriers to disclosure and access to services are worsened by the fact that many women with disabilities have less financial autonomy and less power in their lives than other women.**
- **There is an urgent need to improve policies and services to stop violence and discrimination experienced by women with disabilities.**

### Experience of violence

Results showed no significant difference between women with disabilities and other women in the prevalence of physical or sexual violence perpetrated by partners. However, women with disabilities were up to 4.2 times more likely to have their activities and whereabouts restricted by partners.

The results of both quantitative and qualitative analysis of findings about gender-based violence among Cambodian women with disabilities demonstrate that, compared with women without disabilities in the sample, women with disabilities experience significantly higher levels of emotional, physical and sexual violence by household members other than partners.

Over half, or 52.5 per cent of participants with disabilities reported emotional abuse (compared with 35.2 per cent of other women); a quarter, or 25.4 per cent of women with disabilities reported physical violence (11.4 per cent for women without disabilities); and 5.7 per cent reported sexual violence from family members (compared with 1.1 per cent of other women). This was in addition to controlling and coercive behaviour including having to seek permission from others in the family before accessing health care.

The research found a clear link between violence and disability and increased levels of psychological distress. However, women with disabilities experienced higher levels of psychological distress than other women, *irrespective* of their exposure to violence. This underlines the heavy burden of psychological distress experienced by women with disabilities in Cambodia.

### Barriers to disclosure and services

Few participants disclosed violence to people around them or to support services, whether or not they lived with a disability. Women with disabilities were significantly less likely than other women to disclose partner violence. Barriers to disclosure and access to services were particularly acute for all women when

violence was perpetrated by family members rather than an intimate partner. The combined negative effects of violence and disability were also worsened by the fact that many women with disabilities had less financial autonomy and less agency in their lives than other women.

## Policy directions

There are no policies currently in Cambodia that address the types of violence faced specifically by women with disabilities, or dedicated legal, advocacy or shelter services for them. There is also an urgent need to change discriminatory attitudes and raise awareness on the situation for women with disabilities. In addition, the research highlights several crucial policy directions:

**Identify specific needs of women with disabilities who have experienced violence:** Most available services are focused on the needs of women who have experienced violence at the hands of an intimate partner. Women with disabilities in Cambodia are less likely to have partners and, compared with other women, are also much more likely to experience significant levels of violence at the hands of family members. Policies and programs on violence need to be adapted to respond to these differences.

**Greater involvement of women with disabilities in planning and delivery of disability services to meet specific needs:** Women with disabilities are less likely than men to be leaders or decision-makers of organisations for people with disabilities. This absence of voice not only affects organisational priorities but can also result in the gendered experience of disability or the unique barriers faced by women with disabilities being overlooked when designing policy or programs.

**Transforming attitudes and behaviour which support violence against women:** Challenging underlying discriminatory attitudes that condone and perpetuate violence against women with disabilities requires consistent and long-term policy engagement, grounded in a human rights approach and one that seeks to transform unequal gender relations to promote shared power, control of resources and decision-making.

## Policy and program recommendations

Based on these directions, the research recommends:

**Target funding to address specialist service gaps and improve policy and programming.**

- Focus on initiatives addressing the intersection of gender and disability.
- Support policies and programs of mainstream organisations that identify and reach women with disabilities.
- Funding frameworks that recognise and consider the diversity of women with disabilities (for example, membership of minority ethnic groups).

## Strengthen gender based violence and disability policy and improve institutional responsiveness.

- The Cambodian National Plan of Action to Prevent Violence against Women (under development) should include specific strategies to prevent all forms of violence against women with disabilities, including by family members, and recognise that disability makes women more vulnerable to violence.
- Closer collaboration between disability and gender policy-makers will help to reflect intersections.
- Non-government and government agencies involved in disability policy and gender policy should prioritise assessments of disability and gender activities in their respective programs and processes.
- Organisations and service providers need to better understand how gender influences the experience of disability and vice versa, and review programs to reflect specific needs and priorities of women and men with disabilities.
- Reviews of existing programs and services should involve both women and men with disabilities.

## Preventing violence:

- Targeted education activities to challenge discrimination, increase people's ability to identify violence, support those experiencing violence, and boost support and referral networks need to be implemented in communities.
- Organisations and service providers need to address specific challenges faced by women with disabilities, including: a focus on violence by family members; trauma counselling to address high levels of psychological distress; and developing innovative ways to increase healthcare access.
- Empowering women with disabilities through education on sexual and reproductive rights would have major impact on their ability to control life choices and increase wellbeing.
- GBV programs should consider and address specific infrastructure, communication or other barriers to accessing services faced by women with disabilities.
- Local authorities, police and courts need training on the rights of people with disabilities to improve implementation of existing laws.

## Further reading

Walji, F. "Including women with disabilities in gender and disability policy: reflection on experiences in the Asia-Pacific Region". *Journal for Disability and International Development*, 3. 2009.

The research team has produced a series of low-cost training tools, available in English and Khmer for free download from the websites of Banteay Srei, CBM Australia, CDPO and IWDA.

**Research team:** Banteay Srei, Cambodian Disabled People's Organisation (CDPO), CBM Australia, the International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), and Monash University.

**Editorial team:** Nina Vallins and Fareen Walji

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