

Violence Against Children with Disabilities

Despite the fact that all 28 members of the European Union have ratified the UNCRC, violence continues to blight the lives of millions of children across Europe. In this report the FRA (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights) identifies disabled children as particularly vulnerable to rights abuses. Within the EU, the UNCRC and the CRDP (Convention on the Rights of Disabled Persons) serve important functions in the development of child protection systems. Nevertheless, one of the chief conclusions of this report is that, too often, disabled children ‘fall through the cracks’ of child protection systems and disability specific services (p.8). A more unified approach is therefore required to address the human rights abuse of violence against disabled children.

Research indicates that children with disabilities are typically 3.6 times more likely to experience physical violence and 2.9 times more likely to experience sexual violence than are non-disabled children. However, the nature and severity of the disability impacts the likelihood of abuse. For example, children with intellectual/ psychosocial disabilities are found to be 4.6 times more vulnerable than non-disabled children to sexual violence and exploitation. There are a number of reasons for this. For example, children with intellectual disabilities may be less well equipped to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Abusers sometimes identify children with cognitive or communication limitations as ‘easy targets’ because of the many challenges such children face when it comes to reporting abuse. Moreover, disabled children continue to be perceived as ‘less reliable’ witnesses. This makes prosecuting abusers more difficult. Data collected from rape crisis centres across Europe reveal that disabled people using these services are “more likely to have been subject to multiple incidents of sexual violence” than non-disabled service users (p.64).

In addition to physical, sexual and psychological abuse, disabled children are at risk of ‘disability specific’ forms of violence. These might include: discrimination, segregation, unnecessary restraint, sexual assault during daily hygiene regimes, violence whilst being treated, violence in the guise of treatment (such as electroconvulsive therapy) and over-medication. Children living within alternative care settings are automatically at increased risk from violence. Institutionalized disabled children are still more vulnerable and problems pertaining to lack of transparency and to lack of independence in monitoring and regulation have been identified. Figures obtained over a ten-year period show that 238 disabled children have died in Bulgarian institutions. This amounts to an average of 25 deaths a year, $\frac{3}{4}$ of which the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee believes could have been avoided. Indeed, 31 of these deaths were found to be the result of starvation.

At the same time as noting the dangers inherent in institutionalized care, this report also acknowledges that parents and other carers of disabled children receive inadequate support across the EU. This is particularly problematic in rural settings where services are more limited. The FRA therefore recommends that respite care programmes should be readily available to “prevent burnout and neglect” (p.12). Exhaustion and stress are frequently referred to in this report as key causes of domestic abuse towards disabled children. Attention must also be given to tackling certain societal attitudes that persist around disability. Feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with disability continue to haunt many parents/ families. This makes many families unwilling to seek support.

Children with disabilities are marginalized and stigmatized by large portions of mainstream society. Until the barriers such children face in accessing their rights are broken down, disabled children will remain at greater risk from violence. This report concludes that EU member states need to do more to raise awareness amongst the public about disability in general and about the vulnerability of disabled children in particular. While segregation from the rest of society itself constitutes a serious harm and in some cases also the violation of rights, feelings of isolation can put disabled children at risk from further abuse. In the pursuit of ‘acceptance’, some children have sought community online. The risks of cyber bullying and online sexual grooming which disabled children face are only now beginning to be understood.

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Source: *Violence against with disabilities: legislation, policies and programmes in the EU* (2015) European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights