

Sexual Violence against Girls with Disabilities and a Way Forward

A Speech by Alexandria Wilcox

Good afternoon, my name is Alexandria Wilcox and I will be talking today about girls with disabilities and a way forward.

Violence against girls with disabilities is as prevalent in the UK as it is in Uganda. This is a global problem, and whilst all girls are at risk of being victims of violence, disabled girls find themselves at significantly increased risk because of stigma, negative beliefs and ignorance. They are among the most marginalised groups in the world. UNESCO and others estimate that the number of children with disabilities under the age of 18 around the world varies from 120 to 150 million. Assuming that girls make up less than half, the figure is still substantial and the chance a girl with a disability will experience violence is twice as likely as that of a non-disabled girl. Lack of social support and limited opportunities for education, employment or participation in the community further isolates the girls and their families leading to hardship.

The way forward is prevention, intervention and protection.

Girls with disabilities are exposed to sexual violence, rape and, consequently, HIV and AIDS. In many parts of the world they are sold into prostitution. According to the United States Agency for International Development, human trafficking studies show that the proportion of child prostitutes who have mild development disabilities is six times greater than that of the general population. As Harilyn Rousso in 2003 said, “Girls with disabilities are seen as good catches by prostitution rings, as they won’t attempt to escape”.

Perpetrators of sexual violence are usually part of a victim’s family or community which makes it nearly impossible for girls experiencing violence to escape.

Additionally, in Africa, HIV is aggravated by a well known myth that sex with a virgin will cure a man of AIDS. This is known as the “the virgin cure”. Disabled girls are often abused by this myth, as they are seen as asexual. According to Sue Thomas, author of ‘AIDS “the

virgin myth”, 1 in 9 South Africans live with HIV/AIDS which has led to a “child-rape epidemic”. Kelly Hatfield, director of a group called People Opposed to Women Abuse (POWA), stated that “instead of decreasing with more AIDS education, the myth has taken hold of the South African society.”

Sr Catherine of The Sisters of Charity who conducts workshops to sensitise the locals with respect to STIs in southern Africa, states that “the women are eager to learn but the men are stubborn”. But what is really needed here is medical education about “the virgin cure” so that the men can understand that it is merely a myth. The mindsets of these men will be difficult to change but the sexual violence must stop.

Programmes and initiatives are needed as a way of prevention. Prevention is paramount. They are needed as a way to empower the girls, to raise awareness and to free them from the fear of being abused. Education through these methods needs to be successful to enable effective prevention.

In Germany, they are offering self defence courses. Financing these courses constantly turns out to be an enormous problem. However, they are perceived as extremely effective and necessary by the disabled girls and women who took part.

But there is a lack of programmes and policies for girls with disabilities or, at least, not successful ones. Even where legislation exists, girls still don’t understand their rights. Information on girls’ rights in relation to violence against them, often fails to reach ground level. In addition, men and the girls need to understand that this sexual violence is a serious breach of the girls’ human rights.

Although funding for preventative projects is needed, primary school curriculums could include education on equality and could focus on self-worth for the girls and inappropriate behaviour. As children progress through school, it needs to be highlighted that sexual violence against girls with disabilities is not acceptable on any level. Talk about rape also needs to be included. Education from an early age is key.

For effective intervention and protection, the attitudes of the police force and justice system needs to be altered. They often have no knowledge of how to deal with anyone with a

disability and frequently dismiss individuals with a disability who report rape. In many countries, according to Nora Ellen Groce and Reshma Trasi's report in 2004, individuals with disabilities are not allowed to submit police reports, take oaths or give testimony in court. This inhibits nearly any form of intervention and perpetrators of sexual violence enjoy almost total impunity. Awareness of how to serve someone with a disability must change. It is the lack of confidence the girls have in the justice system and in themselves which prevent reporting. Confidence needs to be encouraged through education but they need to have something to have confidence in.

On a more general note, awareness is key. Globally there needs to be more acceptance of girls with disabilities so that they are given confidence. The Paralympics last year was massively publicised worldwide and showed large numbers of young women with disabilities. It showed them in an inspirational way and a huge amount of respect for girls with disabilities was given. It has produced positive role models and can give courage to the girls.

All states need to take action, not just a select few. The way forward is prevention, intervention and protection. Girls with disabilities need to feel secure. When you don't feel secure, you don't have peace.