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# Toolkit on eliminating violence against women with disabilities in Fiji

➔ By Pacific Disability Forum



**Topic area:** Education and employment.

## Background

Pacific Disability Forum (PDF) is a Fiji based federation of Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs) that represents people with disabilities across the Pacific. They run programs for women and youth with disabilities; conduct research; carry out advocacy on disability rights; support capacity building programs for national DPOs; and help public sector institutions and mainstream development organisations include people with disabilities into their programs.

PDF has hosted a Pacific Regional Forum for Women with Disabilities since 2007 in recognition of the fact women and girls face particular challenges. Over the past two years they have been running a program specifically focused on ending violence and abuse against women and girls with disabilities in the region. Fiji has ratified the Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and are signatories to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). In their 2008 CEDAW report the Government of Fiji mentioned that women with disabilities are one of the 'most marginalised groups in society' (Report to CEDAW Committee, 2008, page 40) although they did not provide any further information about violence against women with disabilities.

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## What happened?

In order to address the gap in awareness and support for issues around violence against women and girls with disabilities, PDF created a project (funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the UN Women's 'basket fund' on ending violence against women) to develop a toolkit for use by DPOs, service providers, government agents and communities.

The project had three distinct phases. During the first phase PDF worked to build the capacity and knowledge of a selection of DPO representatives, family members, care givers, and community workers from across Fiji on issues around violence against women and girls with disabilities. In a two week training program, 22 people were introduced to issues and concepts around gender-based violence and the techniques, legal services, policies and programs focused on violence prevention. The DPO representatives learned techniques to gather and analyze data on violence against women and girls with disabilities in their communities.

During phase two PDF and FDPF members analyzed the data that had been gathered as part of phase one, and then drafted a toolkit which was shared with 40 participants at a four-day workshop designed to review and improve the document. This workshop was primarily aimed at organisations and service providers, the potential users of the toolkit, the majority of who were non-disabled.

The DPO members at the workshop were tasked with putting together action plans to help their communities to prevent violence against women with disabilities.

Phase three involved a round of consultations to raise awareness amongst key interested groups about the toolkit. In addition a workshop was held with a variety of stakeholders in government to field test the toolkit.

## What worked?

One of the key features of this program was the consultation process. Although it took time to develop the toolkit in this way, it provided PDF with the opportunity to raise awareness, gather and share experiences and collaborate with a whole variety of different groups of people. PDF were very strategic in their choice of partners including the Fiji Disabled Persons' Federation; Fijian Women's Crisis Centre; House of Sarah (Association of Anglican Women); the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation; and the Regional Rights Resource Team from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. The varied nature of the partners meant that

a broad base of support for issues around violence against women and girls with disabilities has been created.

Ensuring women with disabilities had a leading role in the research and development of the toolkit was also important. During the first phase of the project, PDF identified a number of women with disabilities who were highly vocal about the issues. The women became important role models during subsequent workshops. Awareness raising using case studies involving violence against women and girls with disabilities collected during the first two phases of the project worked particularly well. As an example, during an unrelated meeting organised by the Regional Rights Resource Team (RRRT), lawyers from across the region were given firsthand accounts of the types of abuse experienced by women with disabilities. It inspired several of them to return to their own countries to put plans in place for addressing the issues. As RRRT representatives explained: "There was little resistance to considering disability. There was recognition of challenges, but a real desire expressed by participants to understand what they need to do, what guidance would help them."

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## What changed?

PDF and the Fiji Disabled Persons' Federation (FDPF) believe the most significant change so far has been in the knowledge and attitudes of non-disabled people. As an FDPF representative recalled: "Non-disabled people had not thought about violence against women and girls with disabilities, so this was a new learning for them."

At government level there are early indications that the issue has gained some attention. The National Task Force on Ending Violence Against Women in Fiji has now agreed to include a representative from the disability movement in its committee discussions. The Ministry of Health is also in the process of drafting a new guide on responding to intimate partner and sexual violence against women which includes a number of references to women with disabilities and some specific suggestions for working with women with disabilities. At international level this project has also had an influence through its key donor, UN Women. Following a presentation on the findings from the project at a learning exchange supported by UN Women other grantees were motivated to think more about how they could include people with disabilities in their own work. A UN Women representative noted: "A grantee in Tonga, for example, that focuses on empowerment of girls, started to look at how they could include girls with disabilities in the camps they organize. Now they do outreach even to include girls with disabilities who are pregnant (in another program for teens)."

## What did we learn?

Women and girls with disabilities experience violence and abuse in ways not encountered by non-disabled women. This makes it extremely important to ensure that any program focused on violence against women makes specific space for connecting with and engaging women and girls with disabilities. There is need to keep in mind that close family members or carers may

be the perpetrators of abuse which makes women and girls with disabilities especially vulnerable. And it can be very difficult for women and girls with disabilities to report abuse because of the barriers and challenges they face in trying to access health, legal and judicial services.

This is a very difficult subject to talk about—both with the women themselves and with the general public. Women who had experienced violence explained that there were very few people who would actually listen to or understand what they had gone through. This made women much more reluctant to talk openly in public about their experiences. As a result there is very little data on the levels of violence and abuse against women and girls with disabilities and very low levels of awareness about its existence.

Women who experience psychosocial disabilities, intellectual disabilities or who are deaf have particular communication and support needs which have to be taken into consideration. Service providers need to develop specific guidelines in order to effectively support women and girls in these circumstances, otherwise they risk continued marginalisation.

Having a common understanding of rights amongst key groups, especially in regard to disability and women was very important.

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