

The right to live without violence

Read the brochure, share the information



This brochure is the outcome of an initiative of the women's network of the European Blind Union (EBU). It aims to make you - the professionals in victim - support services, health-care, violence - prevention and other relevant areas - aware of our existence and how visual disability makes us more susceptible to abuse and violence.

Victimization of women with a visual disability can be hard to identify since it may vary greatly from what is normally considered. The information and practical guidelines in this brochure will add to your ability to recognize when violence occurs, provide appropriate help and support to women with visual disability and make your services and facilities more accessible and inclusive.

Contents

Introduction	page 4
Women with visual disabilities Facts – Figures – Challenges	page 6
Women with visual disability and disability–based violence	page 8
You can help	
Ask about abuse/violence	page 10
Access to the built Environment	page 12
Access to information	page 14
Practical information	page 16
How to identify a woman with a visual disability	page 17
How to guide a woman with a visual disability	page 18
How to meet, greet and assist	page 19
During a group situation	page 20
In a shelter or living facility	page 21
During mealtime	page 22
Conclusion	page 23
Credits	page 24

Introduction

““ At the age of fourteen I was raped by a fake taxi driver. He was waiting for me in front of the school building pretending that he was the man who was to drive me home safely. After he raped me he kicked me out of the car in the middle of a deserted area and drove away taking my cane with him. ””

A. age 21

““ Often, my partner reads me the wrong reading and gives me the wrong dose of medications for my blood sugar. As a result, I can't regulate my diabetes and I end up in bed more unconscious than awake for most parts of the day. ””

L. age 45

Did you really know that we, blind and partially sighted women also face violence?

Besides gender-based discrimination, we are also exposed to disability-based discrimination, two factors that increase our risk of becoming victims of violence and abuse. Although the problem has been, for many years, underreported,

findings from a few studies highlight that we are subjected to violence at least as often as the general female population.

We are subjected to the same kinds of physical, sexual, emotional and financial violence experienced by other women. In addition we are exposed to disability-based violence at significantly high rates, more frequently, for longer, in more ways, and by more perpetrators.

Did you also know that due to our disability, we, blind and partially sighted women, have more difficulties to flee, fight or find help?

Factors such as dependency, invisibility and defenselessness restrict us to access pathways to safety, and to report incidents of violence. Moreover, professionals in support centers and shelter facilities for victims of violence are frequently unaware of our specific needs.

Facts - Figures - Challenges

There are estimated to be over 30 million blind and partially sighted persons in geographical Europe. Women are more at risk of becoming blind or partially sighted than men. Most persons with visual disabilities can see something. It is a common misconception that being blind always means that a person is living in total darkness.

There are many different eye conditions and each one produce a different form of vision distortion. Some women have reduced central vision, others have no peripheral vision. Some see everything as a vague blur; others see a patchwork of blanks.



Normal vision



Diabetic retinopathy



AMD vision



Myopia vision



Cataract vision



Glaucoma

The majority can use their remaining vision to carry out daily routines.

Although some women can recognize a familiar person at arm's length and have enough vision to read, still, the same women may have a hard time at night or when found in an unfamiliar environment.

For visually disabled women, negotiating unfamiliar buildings and streets can be an extremely stressful experience that sometimes forces them to depend on others, oftentimes strangers, and increases their risk and vulnerability.

Unfortunately, due to reasons of accessibility a lot of information is not always widely available to women with visual disabilities. A lot of printed information is not offered in alternative methods while websites are designed in such a way that do not take into consideration accessibility guidelines.

In addition, television advertisements and programmes often display information such as emergency numbers for victims of violence and hotlines on the bottom of the screen without being spoken out loud depriving thus women with visual disabilities of their right to access vital information.

and disability - based violence

“ My husband moves the furniture around the house daily and I am unable to find my way around the house. I keep bumping into furniture that the day before was not there. My legs are so badly bruised. ”

M. age 56

“ My house assistant changes the items in the kitchen cabinets constantly and enjoys it every time that I fail to find what I am looking for. ”

S. age 75

To be a victim of physical and / or emotional violence is to each and every person an extreme violation of his / her right to live a life without exploitation, violence and abuse, as stated in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the declaration of Human Rights. The kinds of abuse women with visual disabilities are subjected to are often an excruciating experience, with their disability, sometimes, being part of the reason for the abuse.

For the victims themselves and for society it is very important to detect the signs of violence and abuse and be

aware of the possibilities for support and guidance in this often very complicated and delicate situation.

This abuse can manifest in ways such as:

- **Changing furniture layouts daily around the house and moving objects so a woman can't find her way around**
- **Withholding or overdosing medication**
- **Withholding mobility aids**
- **Denying accessibility features that allow a woman to access information**
- **Taking advantage of her lack of vision and harming a woman knowing that she will not be able to recognize the aggressor etc.**
- **Withholding and misusing funds intended for the extra costs of the disability**

In many cases the aggressors use a combination of these forms of violence

Ask about abuse / violence

“ My parents were ashamed of my visual disability and through my childhood they hid me in the attic of our house. If it was not for my brother I would have starved to death and gone insane. He secretly brought me food and stayed with me for as long as he could stay unnoticed. Years later, he was the one that helped me escape my prison.”

M. age 61

Some female victims of violence with visual disability are unaware of being victimized and are not familiar with terms like assault, abuse and rape. That's why it is essential to use concrete words like hit, push, do something to your body that you don't want, etc.

Focusing on the woman's perceptions by employing expressions such as being afraid, having an unpleasant experience and being hurt is also crucial.

Here are some examples of direct questions:

- **Has somebody hit / kicked / frightened / hurt you?**
- **I notice that you have a bruise on your arm; how did that happen?**
- **I was just wondering; did something happen to you?**
- **Have you ever been afraid of somebody?**
- **Do you feel secure where you live now?**
- **Do you feel secure with your partner?**

It may be hard for a woman to talk about the violent situation in which she found herself. Therefore, the conversation might need time to unfold.

Once the main reasons for a violated woman's first needs have been seen to and taken care of, a woman with a visual disability may need a little extra attendance and information due to her disability.

Access to the built Environment

“ For many days on my way home from work I had the feeling that someone was following me. Then one evening when I was almost near my house a stranger pulled me towards a wall and embraced and kissed me in the mouth. He then ran off shouting that he can do it any time he wishes since I will never be able to recognize who he is and report him. ”

C. age 34

In your facilities, you can consider the needs of women with visual disabilities in order to create a friendly, safe and accessible environment.

Ensure that:

- **Your facility is easily identified from the outside with clear markings and signage on the building (street number, name on the bell in large legible print) etc**
- **The entrance is easy to locate and identify**
- **The leading edge of all steps are clearly marked in contrasting colour either by paint or tape**
- **Signs are well-positioned, easy to read and ideally with a tactile or braille element**

Include tactile surface to warn people of hazards, such as revolving doors or steps.

If there is a bus route in front of the facility, the stop is easily identified either by an audio announcement or by training the bus drivers to announce the stop.

If there is a crossing near your facility, make sure that it is a safe one. If not, you can request that the local authorities make available some good design features such as tactile paving at the crossing and visual, audible and tactile signals telling you when to cross. If this is not possible, then when arranging for an appointment you can inform the woman with a visual disability of the possible hazard and offer to meet her at the crossing.

Access to information

“ Once I took a taxi from the train station to the hotel where a conference was to take place. The taxi driver threatened me that he could actually take me any place he wanted and do what he wanted to me since I was not able to understand where we were or recognize him. It sounded like he was joking but I am sure that he was not. ”

L. age 49

You can make all information circulated by your facility or support center accessible to women with visual disabilities by ensuring the following:

- **Your website is designed in such a way that meets the accessibility requirements**
- **Your leaflets and other printed documents are of good, standard print legibility – use a simple, minimum of 12 point size, font and a good contrast between text and background**
- **The information in your campaigns and advertisements is spoken and not reflected only on the screen**

- **Your information is produced in Braille or other alternative methods such as audio or DAISY. Your local/national organization of the visually disabled can assist you in that.**

You can find more information on how to produce accessible material at the website of EBU at:

www.euroblind.org/resources/guidelines/nr/88

Practical information

“ I can't go out with friends or participate to school trips because I do not have money of my own. My parents take my welfare allowance and vision disability benefit to pay off our house mortgage and my brother's university studies and car loan. ”

N. age 19

“ At the age of 13 I was repeatedly raped by an older blind boy at the school's dormitory. It took a lot of courage until I could report it to the care staff. ”

V. age 39

How to identify a woman with a visual disability

Sometimes a visual disability is not that obvious.

Below are some signs that might assist you in identifying these women:

- **Body posture**
- **Bring print closer to their eyes**
- **'Strange' head tilting or turning**
- **Not walking confidently**
- **Comes closer to a sign to read it**
- **Finds lighting either too bright or too dim**
- **Has trouble recognizing people**
- **Acts in a confused or disoriented manner**
- **Bumps into objects**

How to guide a woman with a visual disability

Sighted Guide Technique is widely accepted as the safest, most efficient way for a person with a visual disability to walk with a sighted person.

When you assist someone who has a visual disability, this technique will be helpful:

- **Let the woman grip your arm just above the elbow with the thumb on one side and fingers on the other side pointing straight ahead.**
- **You should be about a half step ahead as to be able to maintain a conversation but also be the first to encounter any obstacles.**
- **Alert of any narrow space by placing your guiding arm towards the middle of your back to prompt the person to stay behind you.**
- **Point out curbs and steps as you approach them and say whether they go up or down.**
- **If you are guiding someone into a seat, place their hand on the back of the seat before they sit down, so they can orientate themselves.**
- **In case you have to leave for a while, place the woman in touch with someone or something such as a piece of furniture or the wall.**

A number of videos are available on the internet or your local or national organization of the visually disabled can assist you in finding out ways to help people with visual disabilities and offer you training on sighted guide techniques.

How to meet, greet and assist

Here are some simple hints and tips on ways you can assist women with visual disabilities:

- **Address her by name to make sure that she knows you are speaking to her.**
- **As you introduce yourself say your name even if you have previously met, as she may not recognize your voice.**
- **Introduce her to anyone else who is with you.**
- **Try to speak clearly, facing the woman with the visual disability while you do so.**
- **Ask first before offering any help and do not be offended if your help is refused (all a woman might sometimes need is to walk alongside or behind you).**
- **Address a woman with a visual disability directly, not through her guide/companion.**

- **When giving directions, be specific - giving directions by pointing and saying, 'it is down there on the right', is not much help.**
- **Once into a conversation, never leave without saying you are doing so. Do not allow the woman the embarrassment of talking into the air!**
- **Do not be afraid of using normal language and include words like 'look', 'see', 'read', remembering that blind and partially sighted women have exactly the same vocabulary as sighted people.**
- **Explain any unexpected noises and moments of silences.**
- **Do not expect or invite others to speak on behalf of the woman.**

During a group situation:

- **Make it a habit to go around the room and have every person state their name - in this way the woman with a visual disability can associate the voice with a name and the position in the room.**
- **Address the woman with visual disability by name when directing the conversation to her - do not use noting or gesture signs to prompt her to speak.**
- **If someone joins or leaves the group, inform the woman with visual disability that this has happened.**

In a shelter or living facility

- **Direct the woman to the facility by walking with her rather than giving only verbal directions.**
- **Describe the layout of each room by starting from a central point (usually with your back on the door where you entered).**
- **Keep pathways and corridors clear of obstacles.**
- **Inform the woman of any changes to her environment.**
- **Remember not to move things around as this may cause confusion.**
- **Leave doors fully closed or fully open to avoid the possibility of someone running into them.**
- **Close all cupboards and drawers.**
- **Remove any hazardous items, such as objects with cutting and sharp edges or head-height obstacles as these cannot be located by a cane or a guide dog.**

During mealtime:

- **Read the menu, describe the buffet**
- **Ask before offering a glass or cup refill. If you do so, do not fill it to the brim, in case it spills as it is lifted.**
- **Describe the location of food on the person's plate as corresponding to the numbers on a clock face. For example, tell the person that their fillet is at 6 o'clock and their rice from 11 to 1 o'clock etc.**

Use this method to also describe the location of other items on the table or food tray; for example, if the dinner plate is directly in front of the woman, you can say that the bottle of water is above the plate at 1 o'clock, and the person's glass is at 2 o'clock.

We hope that this brochure has given you extra knowledge and concrete ways to help and support women with visual disabilities in your professional setting.

The European Blind Union and your national / local organizations of the blind may have additional resources and practical information about visual disability. With your expertise on violence prevention and victim support, and our expertise on blind and partially sighted people's needs, together we can make a difference in the lives of many!

Authors:

Maria Kyriacou
Birgitta Blokland
Susanne Tarp
Ann Jönsson
Bente Ullits

Edited by: Maria Kyriacou

Proof read by: Christy Stavrou, Eleni Kaoulla

Lay-out and design: Rodoula Nikolaou

Photos: NIH - National Eye Institute



This publication has been supported by the **European Union Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity - PROGRESS (2007-2013)**.

The information it contains does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

About EBU:

The European Blind Union (EBU) is a non-governmental, non-profit making European organisation founded in 1984. It is one of the six regional bodies of the World Blind Union, and it promotes the interests of blind people and people with low vision in Europe. It currently operates within a network of 44 national members including organisations from all 28 European Union member states, candidate nations and other major countries in geographical Europe.

The European Blind Union
6 rue Gager-Gabillot 75015 Paris, France
Tel: +33 1 47 05 38 20
Fax: +33 1 47 05 38 21

E-mail: ebu@euroblind.org

Website: www.euroblind.org



The voice of blind and partially sighted people in Europe