

These beliefs can potentially influence the conduct of the police service in cases involving women and girls with disabilities, fears can arise that they may not be a credible witness and that their cases may not be prosecutable. It is therefore imperative that police officers familiarize themselves with disability, this can be through disability sensitization programmes.

At all times, the police officer should protect the dignity and integrity of women and girls with disabilities. The police officer should have an understanding that disabled women, just like able-bodied women, deserve equal protection under the law.

The legal capacity and autonomy of women and girls with disabilities should be respected, relevant support should be granted when requested.

The police officer should always safeguard free and informed consent and ensure the provision of the necessary information.

To facilitate effective communication where needed, women and girls with disabilities should be granted access to South African Sign Language Interpreters, AAC, Assistive devices and intermediaries to enable statements to be taken and allow victims to report violations themselves without any influence.

Information meant for the victims should be provided in accessible formats such as Braille, Easy Read and other forms where necessary. Police stations should have the contact details of relevant organisations of and for persons with disabilities and relevant service providers for such.

The police officer should ensure that the station's victim-friendly room is accessible to women and girls with disabilities, accessible means women and girls can easily navigate their way in and out with assistive devices like wheelchairs. Furnishings in the room must not disadvantage women and girls with disabilities in any manner.

The police officer should make sure that the alleged victim with a disability accesses the full complaint or testimonies given, accessibility of information and any communication should always be considered.

The rights of women and girls with psychosocial disabilities to file complaints on an equal basis with others should always be protected; this should be done without discrediting their story in any manner.

Not only is it the duty of police officers, but all of us as concerned citizens to constantly recognize the diversity of persons with disabilities and ensure the promotion and protection of the full enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.

#EndGBV

Believe women and girls with disabilities

Adapted from Dignitem Foundation. (2021). For inclusive quality police services for persons with disabilities: 10 areas of action. Chile: Dignitem Foundation.

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DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE POLICING: A GUIDE

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NCPD
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Persons with Disabilities

Disability and Gender Based Violence

The advent of the pandemic resulted in increased cases of Gender Based Violence in many countries including South Africa. The South African Police Service (SAPS) has been proactive in implementing several interventions to combat the scourge of violence against women and this includes the Victim Empowerment Programme, FCS units etc. Whilst women without disabilities continue to benefit from these interventions, cases of GBV and other forms of abuse on women and girls with disabilities remain underreported due to the myriad of barriers that women with disabilities face when accessing justice.

This pamphlet serves as guidance to disability- inclusive policing on two main aspects:

- 1) Interacting with persons with disabilities and,
- 2) Interacting with alleged victims where the alleged victim is a person with a disability.

Interacting with Persons with Disabilities

Greetings first! As acceptable across different cultures within our rainbow nation, we encourage the police officer to introduce themselves to the disabled person in a non-intimidating manner.

In cases where a support person for instance a South African Sign Language Interpreter accompanies the person with a disability, the police officer should address the disabled person directly, not speak to the support person as if the disabled person is absent.

Adequate time should be allocated for the interaction with the person with a disability; this means the police officer should be patient. The police officer should not present that they are in a hurry to be elsewhere. This will allow the person with a disability to settle down, manage their assistive devices if any, and finish their sentences without abrupt interruptions.

Where the interaction takes place outside a police station, the police officer should indicate and explain any developments for instance the need to put the disabled person in a police vehicle to take statements at the police station.

At all times, the police officer should avoid separating the person with a disability from their assistive device, these include wheelchairs, walking canes, hearing aids etc.

Protect and promote the dignity of persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities and have an understanding that they are not 'dangerous' even when they express their displeasure in various manners. Repeated questioning and being sent back and forth from office to office can potentially trigger frustration in anybody.

Where there is a visually impaired person, the police officer should not be invasive, it is always best to ask the person directly if they need assistance and the form of assistance, if the police station has many obstacles, the police officer should verbally alert the visually impaired person. Avoid tossing braille material in front of the visually impaired person, not all visually impaired persons are braille literate, so it is always advisable to ask first.

Ensure the station has contact details of community sign language interpreters or their organisations, Deaf persons can access interpreters through video calls. Always speak directly to the Deaf person, avoid speaking directly to the interpreter and ignoring the Deaf person, avoid turning your back to the Deaf person when speaking, and always ensure you are visible. Understand that not all hearing-impaired persons can use South African Sign Language, deaf people usually read lips and use other alternative means of communication; ensure that you have a transparent mask when speaking to deaf persons.

Acknowledge that not all disabilities are physical or visible.

Always ensure that the environment allows disabled persons to express themselves freely.

Explain all procedures or charges calmly and clearly and repeat where necessary until the person acknowledges that they have understood the procedure or charges.

Always try to capture the Gender and Disability of the person, Disability is not a gender

Interacting with persons with disabilities where the person with a disability is an alleged victim. The case for women and girls with disabilities and the importance of intermediaries.

The police service must understand that women and girls with disabilities are more exposed to GBV and other forms of abuse than able-bodied women are. Forms of abuse and gender-based violence against women and girls with disabilities take many unique forms; this includes withholding of support or treatment, isolation, ableism, economic abuse, and emotional and sexual abuse. The police officer must understand that caregivers of women and girls with disabilities and close family members can perpetuate these forms of abuse. If women and girls with disabilities decide to report cases, family members and caregivers who in some instances could be perpetrators usually accompany them.

The police officer must acknowledge that the alleged victim with a disability has the right to tell their story in confidence in the absence of family members and caregivers.

It is also crucial that the police officer takes cognizance of the fact that unintended secondary- victimization of women and girls with disabilities is a major barrier and a reason why most women and girls with disabilities do not report violations. Secondary victimisation usually stems from myths and beliefs that are held about women and girls with disabilities for instance the belief that they are asexual, cannot have sexual relationships or family, cannot be independent, and cannot say no to any man because nobody would want to be with them.