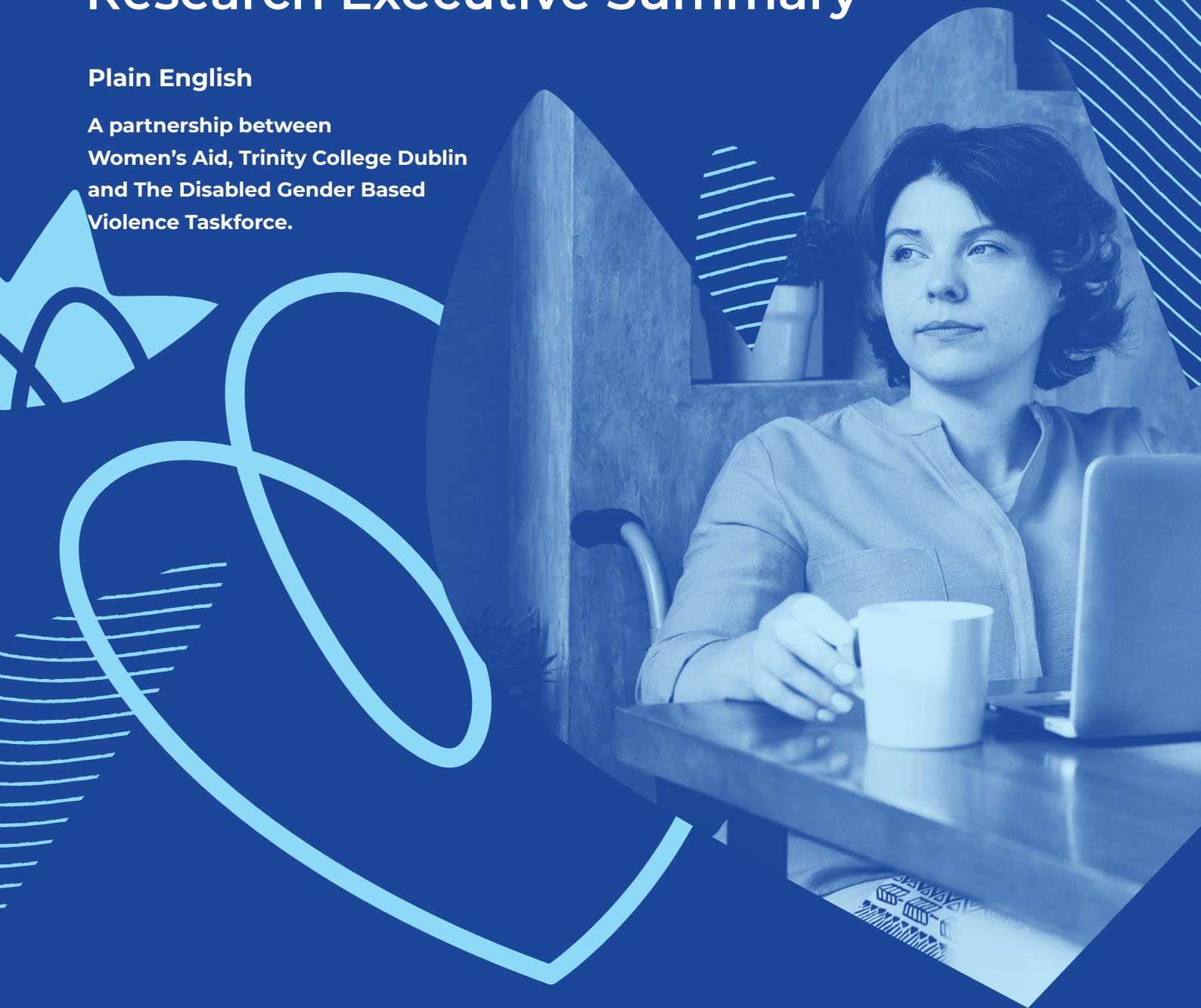


# Disabled Women's Experiences of Intimate Partner Abuse in Ireland:

## Research Executive Summary

Plain English

A partnership between  
Women's Aid, Trinity College Dublin  
and The Disabled Gender Based  
Violence Taskforce.





#### Citation

This report should be cited as follows:  
Flynn, S., Lakkshme Sundaresan,  
S., Holt, S., Price, A. & O'Neill, G. (2024)  
Disabled women's experiences of  
intimate partner abuse in Ireland:  
Research project report – Executive  
Summary. Ireland: Women's Aid.

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# Introduction

The overall aim of this study was to achieve a deeper understanding of intimate partner abuse against disabled women in Ireland, to better provide them with support and for the improvement of the domestic violence services that may serve them. The project explores disabled women's experiences of intimate partner abuse in the Republic of Ireland, including accessibility and involvement with specialist domestic violence services. In this context, our study specifically focuses on persons identifying as women. Gender minorities and gender non-conforming people who identify as women were included in the scope of this research project. Additionally, our approach recognises that human rights are universal, and that disability may be interpreted differently. As such, we include those who self-identify as having a disability. The present study explores the gravity of intimate partner abuse against disabled women in Ireland with a clear focus maintained on disabled women and their experiences of intimate partner abuse. Other experiences\* of violence fall outside the scope of this particular project. Our definition† of intimate partner abuse for this research is in line with the World Health Organisation, which defines abuse by intimate partners as “behavior by a current or ex intimate partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours”.‡ Specifically, this study sought to speak to women who had left abusive relationships.

## Note on the language used within the Report:‡

1. Where the term vulnerability is used, it is not to be understood as an inherent characteristic of disabled people but as referring to the social, economic, and other factors which increase their vulnerability.
2. In keeping with the social model of disability, which understands disability as an interaction between an individual's impairments or differences and societal and structural barriers, we will mostly use identity-first-language (e.g., disabled women) throughout this Report. However, we alternate between this and person-first-language (e.g., women with disabilities) in recognition of the multiple ways in which disabled women may choose to identify. We also separate 'impairment' which often refers to the actual congenital condition, injury or illness that a person identifies as having, from 'disability'. The social

\* Other experiences include any form of abuse, violence or harassment caused by family members (who are not intimate partners) or any other persons or strangers. These experiences fall outside the scope of this research.

† Important note: References used in this research are included within Endnotes at the back of this report.

‡ Guidance on language taken from *Disabled Women Ireland, Submission to the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence on Ireland's Compliance with the Istanbul Convention, 2023*.

model separates impairment from disability – disability is the society-made systematic barriers that disabled people experience and these barriers exclude them from participating in mainstream society.

3. We acknowledge that language around intimate partner abuse also is important to consider and has complex implications. We acknowledge in our use of the term ‘intimate partner abuse’ that abuse can take many complex forms, which may include physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, economic violence and coercive control. We acknowledge that other language, such as ‘domestic violence’ is widely used, and we are sensitive to the fact that all prevalent language on this subject matter has limitations and existing criticisms.
4. Some of the findings of this study are graphic and potentially distressing. Representation of the lived experiences and views of disabled women is done in women’s own words, or where we report those experiences and views, we aim to closely replicate women’s original words and intended meaning. This leads to the sharing of some potentially distressing information.

## **Background to the research**

The project is the result of a funded collaboration between Women’s Aid (funders), a national feminist organisation working to prevent and address the impact of domestic violence and abuse, including coercive control, in Ireland since 1974; the Disabled Gender Based Violence Taskforce, a coalition of long-term disability rights activists who have come together to focus on Gender Based Violence; and Trinity College Dublin, School of Social Work and Social Policy, an established centre of learning, scholarship, excellence and innovation. Project partners are passionate about preventing and combatting all forms of violence and abuse against disabled women and are committed to the use of robust information and data to drive social change. An advisory committee of experts from key not-for-profit and governmental organisations in the Republic of Ireland was also formed to advise on matters of importance in conducting the research.

## **Acknowledgements**

The project partners would like to acknowledge and thank the research team and the research advisory members for their support and work on this project.

We are especially grateful for the input into this research from survivors of intimate partner abuse and to the staff from local and national specialist domestic violence support services who generously shared their experiences, insights and expertise in the hope of bringing about real change for disabled women subjected to intimate partner abuse in Ireland.

<b>Research Team</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Project Role</b>
Dr Susan Flynn	Trinity College Dublin	Research Team member
Dr Stephanie Holt	Trinity College Dublin	Research Team member
Sowmia Lakkshme Sundaresan	Trinity College Dublin	Research Team member
Gladys O'Neill	Disabled Gender Based Violence Taskforce	Research Team member
Dr Aoife Price	Disabled Gender Based Violence Taskforce	Research Team member

<b>Research Advisory</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Project Role</b>
Sarah Benson	Women's Aid	Co-chair/Research Advisory
Christina Sherlock	Women's Aid	Co-chair/Research Advisory
Denise Kiernan	Women's Aid	Secretariat
Dr Rosaleen McDonagh	Women's Aid – Board of Directors	Research Advisory
Nem Kearns	Disabled Gender Based Violence Taskforce	Research Advisory
Suzy Byrne	National Advocacy Service	Research Advisory
Derval McDonagh	Inclusion Ireland	Research Advisory
Melissa Howlett	National Deaf Women of Ireland	Research Advisory
Fiona Weldon	Independent Living Movement Ireland	Research Advisory
Dr Michael Feely	Trinity College Dublin	Research Advisory
Dr Carly Cheevers	National Disability Authority	Research Advisory
Deaglán Ó Briain	The Department of Justice	Research Advisory
Dr Angela Unufe	Migrant Disability Network	Research Advisory

# Executive Summary

This study aimed to find out about 'intimate partner abuse' (IPA) which is where one partner is abusive to another partner. This can include being violent which can mean kicking and punching and other violent actions. The study was about IPA that is done to disabled women in the Republic of Ireland. The study also was about how services that work to deal with domestic violence (which can be another way of saying IPA) help disabled women who have gone through this type of abuse. The study did a survey with disabled women which is where questions were answered by the women about this kind of abuse. The study also asked questions of workers in domestic violence services through another survey. The study included interviews which is where researchers talked one-to-one to six disabled women. Lastly, the study looked into information that can be read by the public, that gives a sense of how easy it is to use domestic violence services when you are a disabled woman. People who took part in our study are sometimes called participants.

## Findings from the survey with disabled women

97 questionnaires (a questionnaire is the list of questions asked of women in the survey) were filled out by disabled women. Some were not fully filled out. These were then looked at by researchers to see what could be learned. In this section, some statistics will be given. These refer to the percentage of people who answered the question that was asked. In the survey, disabled women told us they had experienced different kinds of abuse that sometimes happened alongside each other. The most common types were 'emotional (psychological) abuse' (89% of participants) which is about mental abuse or abuse that hurts emotions. After this was 'coercive/controlling behaviours' (76% of participants) which is about things like the abuser trying to have control over their partner. After this was 'physical violence/abuse' (70% of participants). After this was 'abusive tactics specifically related to disability' (60% of participants) which is about ways of hurting a partner that is to do with their disability.

Some participants also had experienced, in order of the most common to the least common: Economic abuse (this is about money), sexual violence/abuse, doing damage to belongings of the partner, stalking behaviours (this is about things like following a partner everywhere they go), online/digital abuse (this is about the internet) and harming a pet or animal. Disabled women who had IPA done to them seem to suffer more physical, economic and sexual violence than women who don't have disability who were abused by their partners.<sup>63</sup>

Participants often did not know what IPA was. Only a little over half of the participants (56%, n=47) knew that the types of IPA named already in this Plain English Summary, actually were types of IPA. 70% of participants had heard of the term 'coercive control' before. Only 53% of participants knew what it meant before we explained it to them in the survey.

96% of participants thought that their disability made it harder to cope with IPA. Abuse that was specifically about disability took many different forms for participants. This included name calling about disability (70%, n=68), not accepting their disability (66%, n=64), and lack of support to do everyday activities (49% n=48). There were also many things that stopped help-seeking. 71% of participants said they felt shame about what was happening; 65% said they were hesitant (uncertain) to tell others about what was happening; 56% hoped that their partner would change what they were doing; 51% were afraid of being hurt again; and 35% didn't have another way of having money and covering costs without their abuser.

A third of participants told us that they had been through coercive control (36%) and psychological or emotional abuse (36%) everyday, making these the most common forms of IPA that happened on a daily basis. 51% of participants continued to have the abuse happen even after they had split up with their abusive partner. Only 61% of women told someone about the abuse and 39% told nobody.

An online survey was done by a different study to this one, and it gives some useful information to compare to, which relates to our statistics. It was done by Women's Aid in 2019,<sup>63</sup> and was about all women not just women with disability. It found out that 46% of women who took part, who had been through abuse from their partner, looked for help and information and 33% did not.<sup>60</sup>

77% of participants who told someone about the abuse had reached out to a friend, making this the most common way to look for help. 79% told us, however, that they believed that workers and services were less able to help them because of their disability. 68% had the view that workers (professionals) in general were less likely to believe experiences of IPA told by them as disabled women.

Participants were also not confident, in general, about the value of court in protecting them. 84% of the women did not seek protection through the courts. The most common reasons for not seeking protection from a court were fear that something bad would happen against them as a result, lack of knowledge about how court works, belief that court may not be helpful and a lack of belief in their own ability to seek protection. Lastly, a little over half of the participants told us that they could not leave when they felt threatened or hurt (60%, n=58) due to their disability. In 14% of cases, IPA was a direct cause of disability for participants. Worryingly most participants were also not aware of Domestic Violence and Abuse (DVA) services, with more than half not being able to name any service.



## Qualitative (interviews) findings

To better understand disabled women's experiences, this study also did six interviews with disabled women who had been through IPA. Disabled women told us they felt as though their freedom was lessened by their abuser. Women's disabilities were often used against them, such as an abuser stopping them being able to take their medicine. Physical violence such as kicking and hitting by abusers towards women had bad effects related to disability. This included actually causing disability through harming their brain or spine or making problems they already had with their bodies worse, so that they had to go to hospital. It was clear from participant's stories, that by being disabled, they already had a hard time trying to pay for the cost of living. This problem was made worse by abuse related to money. There were also a lot of things that stopped disabled women being able to leave their bad relationship. These included depending on an abuser to move around and having no help to get to domestic violence services. Participants also told us they were afraid they could lose their children due to lack of disability services to help them with being parents.

## Findings from survey with DVA services

A survey was done with domestic violence services. These services help women who are hurt by their partners. The survey was about how these services can help, and do help, disabled women. The results show that there is still much to be done so that all services can be gotten to by women with different types of disabilities.

67% of services knew about things that are often types of abuse against disabled women such as preventing disabled women seeing other people. 46% of the services took steps on purpose to include disabled women when they made decisions. Only 1 service reached out to disabled women specifically about accessing their services, 43% of services pulled together information on disabled women, while 94% of services thought that there was not enough money to include disabled women fully and properly in their services. All the people who did the survey thought training would be useful.

## Findings from mapping exercise

This study also did a 'mapping exercise'. This meant finding out how easy it is for disabled women to access services that are for domestic violence. 96% of the services had some way of talking to, or using the service from a distance including websites, Facebook pages, and emails.

69% of the services gave some support through helplines or telephones. 60% of the services helped by going to court with women. Only 2% of services appeared to have a support service through 'Text' messages and only 2% mentioned accessibility (being able to get to or use the services) on their landing page of their website. Most of the services could be found on Google Maps (87%), with 51% of these services talking about wheelchair accessibility on Google Maps.

## **What it all means**

Overall, this study was very helpful for learning about IPA that happens to disabled women in Ireland. Findings tell us that disability has big impacts on help seeking and coping. The impacts of IPA on disabled women were big in our study. Impacts often were related in some way to disability such as women being unable to leave an abuser, or an unsafe place, due to not having help to move their bodies. Disabled women had types of abuse related to disability, that made worse the types of abuse they had that weren't to do with disability. Domestic violence services will be better when they know more about disability.

To help domestic violence services, more money and training is needed to help improve understanding. It also needs to be easier to access services. The lack of use of courts and poor ideas about the helpfulness of professionals among our participants are very worrying. This study shows big differences between the experiences and commonness of experiences between disabled and non-disabled women. This means that more resources, policies and action are needed fast to help disabled women who have abuse done against them. Filling the gap in such resources is very important.

Low knowledge from disabled women of what IPA and coercive control is, is worrying. Lack of services to help meet needs must be dealt with fast.

## Recommendations

Recommendations are ideas about what needs to happen. These ideas come from our learning through the study. These are put in groups to do with the people or services they refer most to, however everyone should think these recommendations might relate to them. The recommendations are:

### For Government:

**“I was selling a house with him and had to live with him while separating and selling, I didn’t have anywhere else to go or any finances to leave until it sold... I didn’t think there would be any financial support for a homeowner.” -Saoirse**

1. The report of learning from the study should be given to the Government. This will help with learning for the ‘Department of Housing’ plans for refuges that will be built.
2. Disabled women and their services that act on their behalf should be included as partners in the current and future ‘National DSGBV strategy’ as well as its plans.
3. Houses for disabled women who are trying to get away from abuse must be part of the work of making Ireland’s national homeless and housing strategy happen.
4. Steps for living on one’s own under the ‘National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022 – 2027’ should be taken as much as possible and within this, Government should think about disabled women who are trying to get away from IPA.
5. All steps to make access and inclusion happen within the ‘Courts Service Modernisation programme’ need to happen fully and quickly.

### For the Courts:

**“I was told to get a court safety order, I got a court safety order and my abuser threatened me that he would kill me 32 times. I reported every single one of these threats and breaches to my court order and the Gardaí did nothing to help my son and I.” -Kate**

6. The courts should talk to and do research with disabled women as a group to listen to their concerns about the accessibility and usefulness of court services.
7. Findings from doing this should be used to make training for court staff, legal workers and others to deal with issues like discrimination (unfairly bad treatment just to one group) towards disabled women.

## For learning, knowing and training:

**“Proper support from State agencies [would have helped]. An actual understanding of coercive control and of disability. Making a complaint against the abuser made everything so much worse and the situation so much more dangerous and there was no follow-on support. I felt like I’d been thrown to the wolves by the agencies.” -Maeve**

8. Money from Government should be given to the making and giving of training on domestic violence against disabled women, for those working in violence support services and those working in disability services and disabled person’s organisations. This training should be done together with disabled person’s organisations and should be given money each year to make sure the training doesn’t stop.
9. Mental health services should be trained in both domestic violence and abuse and trauma (‘trauma’ is bad effects on well-being due to bad things having happened to someone in the past). This should seek to stop women’s responses to violence and abuse from being seen as only into a medical problem that they personally have. Such training should be developed with specialist services.
10. These findings should be shared in a way that involves training and making others more aware of IPA toward disabled women. Our findings show these areas are very important:
  - 10a: Training people who work at courts, so they know about disabled women’s concerns about their children, such as worries about losing their children.
  - 10b: Understanding of the law about coercive control, as well as understanding about the court, and how to get protection through the courts as disabled women. This should include telling women about the risks of trying to get court protection.
  - 10c: Disabled people-led disability equality training on IPA should be given to judges and people who work at courts as well as people in law enforcement. This should include a focus on stopping misunderstanding about disabilities.
  - 10d: Disabled people-led training should be given to local housing authorities and social housing providers about disability and domestic abuse and needs that are related.
  - 10e: There is a need to improve knowledge among family and friends. They should know that disabled women could be hurt by their partners. This is important to know as disabled women in our study said they were most likely to ask for help from family and friends.

10f: Common mistakes people make in their knowledge about sex and disabled women need to be reduced, such as not knowing disabled women could be hurt sexually.

10g: More needs to be known about domestic abuse/ coercive control but also disability specific abuse among public policy makers, researchers, and domestic violence services, as well as disabled person's organisations and disability services.

11. Disability services and domestic violence services should do things to improve disabled women's understanding of what is domestic abuse and coercive control, including telling them about support services and helping them know that coercive control and stalking are crimes.
12. The problem of IPA towards disabled women should be made more visible through pictures that includes disability when sharing knowledge about domestic violence and about criminal justice, health, housing and support services.
13. Community mental health services should be helped to know more and do more about mental health problems that come from IPA of disabled women.

#### **For working together:**

**“I called Citizens Advice and they only gave me [name of domestic violence service] and they were not in a position to help me because of my disability... house of refuge was not accessible. There was no other alternative except for staying being abused.” -Aoibheann**

14. Ways of disability services and domestic violence services working together to lead to joined up thinking and joined up action is helpful and should be developed.
15. Domestic violence services and disability services should work together on supports. These supports should try to stop disabled women losing their ability to make choices for themselves. These supports should help disabled women to be free when trying to leave abusive situations and relationships.

#### **For Judges:**

**“Access to his children was used as a tool by him and the Courts to allow abuse to continue. How he continues to impact us by his actions is ignored by the Judge.” -Una**

16. Take a disability rights approach, which should also be about a children's rights approach, when making decisions about children visiting their parent or custody to address bias against disabled parents.

## Funding and resourcing

**“I was completely dependent on my partner financially as we were over the threshold for welfare support... He controlled where I went and who I saw and if I was to leave I physically had no access to transport apart from a 1 mile to the local bus, no money to pay for tickets and nowhere to go that could provide me immediate support... I was totally trapped.”** -Ciara

17. Urgently secure additional resources to meet accessibility requirements of domestic violence services, including strategies to make accessibility and disability supports visible.

18. Increase working together of mental health services and domestic violence services to help disabled women with the mental health impacts of IPA.

### **For disability and domestic violence service providers:**

**“Knowing my rights better, having a clearer picture of how I deserved support with my disability as well as a peaceful life [would have helped].”** -Maura

19. Specialist domestic violence services should make their collecting of information better around disability among women who use their service. This must include a question of all service users about whether they have disability. Where possible, information should be collected that allows services to do a breakdown of the type of disabilities women have.

20. Specialist domestic violence services should make opportunities for disability experts to share knowledge and suggestions on how domestic violence services can be made more accessible.

21. Services with the ability to give training on disability rights and domestic violence should seek resources to work together to make special training on helping to disabled women who have IPA in Ireland.

### **About access:**

**“I didn’t have the energy to repeat my circumstances all over again, especially if they couldn’t offer me any support. I was afraid there was no support for me.”** -Cara

22. Funding should be given to that national helplines can be contacted through free text messages and webchat, 24-hours a day, 7-days a week.

23. Easy-to-Read information, including information on how to find support, should be open for the public to get, including in disability day services and healthcare places.

24. Because of low levels of telling others about violence by victims with disabilities, Garda stations need to be accessible for those with physical disabilities, and disabled women need to be able to use methods for making complaints, and Gardaí need to be trained to understand the how violence happens against disabled women.
25. A review should be done of changes in Ireland to do with the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 and adult safeguarding law so that we can know if these changes will affect how disabled women look for help.

**For Cuan:**

**“I couldn’t work and couldn’t get out of the house then and I was always trapped with him. I wasn’t believed and my disabilities were used against me.”**  
-Clodagh

26. ‘Cuan’ is a ‘Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Agency’. Cuan should use an approach that thinks about other aspects of a person, not just their disability, but also whether they are a woman, or what race they are, and other aspects of them. Then this should help with the work done to protect women with disabilities.
27. Cuan should try to make sure DSGBV service providers are accessible to people with disabilities. They should try to have ISL interpretation services be available and have information that can be understood about services for persons at risk of DSGBV. Enough money must be given to make this happen.
28. Cuan should try to pay for more studies on disabled women who go through IPA to build on this study.

# Endnotes

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**Women's Aid  
5 Wilton Place  
Dublin  
D02 RR27**

**womensaid.ie**

**info@womensaid.ie**

**+353 (01)6788858**

**24hr National Freephone Helpline 1800 341 900**

**Registered Charity No. 20012045**

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