



## Executive Summary

### More Than A Footnote: A Research Report on Women and Girls with Disabilities in Canada

#### Introduction

Women and girls with disabilities in Canada face unique challenges and barriers that call for gendered and intersectional approaches that inform research, education, policy, and practice. Our “More Than A Footnote” report provides a snapshot of the complex situations facing women and girls with disabilities in Canada. We have drawn from a number of diverse sources, with an emphasis on community-based research, to piece together a comprehensive understanding of the lived experience of disability for women and girls in Canada. Below is a summary of key learnings that we hope serve as a call to action for broader support for women and girls with disabilities.

#### Social Exclusion

Women and girls with disabilities continue to face exclusion in all aspects of their lives. In fact, with nearly half (**49%**) of all discrimination complaints in Canada grounded in disability, there is ample evidence that social exclusion remains a significant barrier.<sup>1</sup>

#### Income & Income Security

Unsurprisingly, women with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by poverty and continue to face barriers where income security is concerned. In Canada, between **26%**<sup>2</sup> and **33%**<sup>3</sup> of those living in poverty are women with disabilities. Women with disabilities also report lower levels of personal income, with those aged 15 and over working full-time reporting on average **\$37,070** in income (\$2,250

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Human Rights Commission. (2015). The rights of persons with disabilities to equality and non-discrimination: Monitoring the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Sekharan, V. (2015) Infographic: Canadian Women in Poverty. Homeless Hub. Available at: <http://www.homelesshub.ca/blog/infographic-canadian-women-poverty>

<sup>3</sup> Canadian Women's Foundation. The Facts About Women and Poverty. <http://www.canadianwomen.org/facts-about-women-and-poverty>

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less than women without disabilities).<sup>4</sup> Women also remain more likely to experience invisible and/or less visible conditions like **pain and chronic fatigue**, which are less likely to be covered under programs that compensate for work-related disabilities.<sup>5</sup>

## Education

While education plays a key role in the lives of women and girls with disabilities, unequal access at all levels continues to disproportionately influence women and girls. In Canada, women with disabilities aged 25-54 are more likely (**18.3%**) to report having no degree, diploma, or certificate than women without disabilities (8.3%).<sup>6</sup> In addition,  $\frac{1}{2}$  of women report that they took fewer courses, that it took longer for them to reach their existing level of education, and just over **46%** report that their career choice was influenced by their disability.<sup>7</sup>

## Employment & Working Conditions

Women with disabilities report a number of barriers here, including unemployment, underemployment, lower wages, issues accessing accommodation, and concerns around continued workplace discrimination. Indeed, women with disabilities are less likely to participate in the labour force with only **61.3%** between the ages of 25-54 participating and a **13.4%** unemployment rate among women with disabilities.<sup>8</sup>

## Livelihoods

While many women with disabilities are not formally part of the labour process, their unseen and often invisible contributions cannot be overlooked. This includes participation in exploitative sites like **sheltered**

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<sup>4</sup> Burlock, A. ( 2017) Women with Disabilities. *Women in Canada: a Gender Based Statistical Report*. Statistics Canada. Available at: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14695-eng.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Meana, M., Cho, R., & DesMeules, M. (2004). Chronic pain: the extra burden on Canadian women. *BMC women's health*, 4(1), S17.

<sup>6</sup> Burlock, A. ( 2017) Women with Disabilities. *Women in Canada: a Gender Based Statistical Report*. Statistics Canada. Available at: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14695-eng.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Burlock, A. ( 2017) Women with Disabilities. *Women in Canada: a Gender Based Statistical Report*. Statistics Canada. Available at: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14695-eng.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Burlock, A. ( 2017) Women with Disabilities. *Women in Canada: a Gender Based Statistical Report*. Statistics Canada. Available at: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14695-eng.htm>

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**workshops**, where there are concerns that women have remained in these sites despite policy shifts,<sup>9</sup> and a lack of support for mothers with disabilities. For example, mothers with disabilities remain more likely to experience **stress and barriers** due to high rates of **precarious employment and lack of access to affordable child care services**.<sup>10</sup> Collectively, these experiences indicate a need to acknowledge and explore the unpaid labour of women with disabilities.

### Girl Children & Youth

While general research points to the unique needs of girl children and youth with disabilities, there is a serious lack of Canadian material that explores the experiences of girls with disabilities. Yet, research elsewhere highlights a pressing need to support girls with disabilities, including evidence that while just as many girls as boys require special education services in the US, **girls remain less likely to be identified and referred for support services**.<sup>11</sup> Girls with disabilities also experience **higher rates of poor mental health and substance use** linked to experiences of intimate partner violence in high school.<sup>12</sup>

### Food Insecurity

Food insecurity remains an important and growing barrier for women and girls with disabilities. Inadequate nutrition and access to healthy and affordable food are linked to increases in health related and chronic issues.

### Housing

Women and girls with disabilities continue to face barriers in terms of accessible and affordable housing. In Canada, **46%** of women who report having been homelessness also have a disability.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> May-Simera, C. (2018). Reconsidering Sheltered Workshops in Light of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). *Laws*, 7(1), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Milne, K. (2016) High Stakes: The impacts of child care on the human rights of women and children. West Coast LEAF. Available at: <http://www.westcoastleaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/High-Stakes-low-res-for-web.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Arms, E., Bickett, J., & Graf, V. (2008). Gender bias and imbalance: Girls in US special education programmes. *Gender and Education*, 20(4), 349-359.

<sup>12</sup> Mitra, M., Mouradian, V. E., & McKenna, M. (2013). Dating violence and associated health risks among high school students with disabilities. *Maternal and child health journal*, 17(6), 1088-1094.

<sup>13</sup> Cotter, A. (2018) *Violence and Victimization of Women with Disabilities*. Statistics Canada. Available at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54910-eng.pdf>

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## Health Services & Well Being

Women and girls with disabilities continue to face numerous attitudinal, physical, and economic barriers. In Canada, while women are more likely than men to have a disability,<sup>14</sup> health conditions that disproportionately impact women, like **chronic fatigue syndrome**, remain less understood than those associated with men, like spinal cord injury.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, in one Canadian study, the **majority of women with disabilities** remained unaware of accessible facilities related to getting breast and vaginal exams.<sup>16</sup>

## Sexual and Reproductive Health

Persistent and outdated myths about women and girls with disabilities mean many individuals remain underserved. Women with disabilities share that they have limited options in terms of contraceptives, as practitioners often appear surprised that they are sexually active and fail to ask about contraception and STIs.<sup>17</sup>

## Gender Identity

There is an urgent need for more work where disability and gender identity is concerned. Yet, existing research indicates that trans individuals in Canada report not being treated with dignity, not being allowed to transition genders, sexual harassment, and segregation from other patients in mental health environments.<sup>18</sup>

## Violence & Abuse

<sup>14</sup> Wall, K (2017) Low income among persons with disabilities in Canada. Insights on Canadian Society. Statistics Canada. Available at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2017001/article/54854-eng.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Pinto, P. C. (2015). Women, disability, and the right to health. *Women's Health 2e: Intersections of Policy, Research, and Practice*, 137.

<sup>16</sup> BC Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, & Riddell, L. (2003). *We're Women, Too: Identifying Barriers to Gynecologic and Breast Health Care of Women with Disabilities*. Vancouver, BC: British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health. Available at: [http://bccewh.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2003\\_Were-Women-Too.pdf](http://bccewh.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2003_Were-Women-Too.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Becker, H., Stuifbergen, A., & Tinkle, M. (1997). Reproductive health care experiences of women with physical disabilities: a qualitative study. *Archives of physical medicine and rehabilitation*, 78(12), S26-S33.

<sup>18</sup> Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2012). Minds that Matter: Report on the consultation on human rights, mental health and addictions. *Toronto: Ontario Human Rights Commission*. Available at: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/minds-matter-report-consultation-human-rights-mental-health-and-addictions>

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Women and girls with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by various forms of violence and abuse. Women with disabilities are **twice as likely** as those who do not have a disability to be the **victim of violent crimes**, as well as twice as likely to have been **victimized more than once in the last 12 months**, and in 45% of incidents of self-reported crime (including sexual assault, robbery, and physical assault) the victims were women with disabilities.<sup>19</sup>

## Transportation

While affordable and accessible transportation is key to real and meaningful inclusion, this is a barrier that persists for women and girls with disabilities. This is key, as **21.2%** of women with disabilities aged 15 and older regularly access public transit, and women with disabilities are more likely than men to use public transportation.<sup>20</sup>

## Summary

'More Than a Footnote' brings together several strands of existing research, with some original contributions, to piece together a more comprehensive understanding of what it is like to be a woman or a girl with a disability in Canada. We seek to use this work to inform research, education, policy, and practice in ways that are emancipatory to women and girls with disabilities. It is our hope that readers will engage this piece in ways that inform their own work and spur discussions and partnerships that collectively move us beyond the barriers that women and girls with disabilities face and towards solutions-based action informed by lived experience.

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<sup>19</sup> Cotter, A. (2018) *Violence and Victimization of Women with Disabilities*. Statistics Canada. Available at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54910-eng.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Burlock, A. (2017) *Women with Disabilities. Women in Canada: a Gender Based Statistical Report*. Statistics Canada. Available at: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2015001/article/14695-eng.htm>

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