



DisAbled Women's Network (DAWN) Canada
Réseau d'Action des Femmes Handicapées (RAFH) Canada

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**Speaking Notes before the Standing Committee on the Status of
Women (FEWO)
For the study of violence against young women and girls in Canada
November 23, 2016**

Good afternoon, everyone.

I would like to begin today by recognizing that we are in a time of truth and reconciliation here in Canada with our indigenous sisters and brothers and acknowledge that we are gathered today on the territory of the Algonquin Nation.

I would also like to thank the committee for bringing us here today and for undertaking this important study on violence against women and girls. DAWN Canada is a pan-Canadian feminist disability organization and continues to be the only organization, for more than 30 years now, that is focused on addressing their experiences of violence.

It is so important to acknowledge that despite all our wishes to the contrary, it is girls who are the most at risk of violence—yes, girls, and sometimes young girls. If I may remind the committee, the most at risk among young women and girls are those who live with a disability or are deaf, up to three times more at risk, something DAWN Canada and this committee must find unacceptable and must address with the same urgency with which we have finally begun to address the deplorable situation faced by indigenous women.

As always, DAWN Canada comes to this committee from an intersectional perspective that encompasses all disabilities, both visible and invisible, but

with a clear understanding that while all young women and girls are at risk, there are some factors that greatly increase risk, including type of disability, being indigenous, being black—being differently abled.

Although our data collection on these issues will soon be improved and is being addressed by Minister Hajdu under her national strategy, we have to work with very limited data—for example, about our cohort and about indigenous women and girls. We know that the rates of disability are the highest with indigenous women and sit somewhere between 25% and 35% at a minimum.

We wish to express our deep disappointment and concern that there has been no meaningful effort to include indigenous women and girls with disabilities in the inquiry, despite the fact that, again, a minimum of one third of these women would have been living with a disability, whether acknowledged, diagnosed, or not. We urge the committee to address this in your recommendations.

Ableism is, in and of itself, a form of violence against women, as is racism. Systemic ableism abounds, as does systemic racism. It is not deliberate, it is not intended, but it is highly pervasive, and our organization is working very hard to address this.

Sarah Stott died just a few months ago. We do not know for certain what her cause of death was, but we can assume that an ableist society that places less value on those who are differently abled almost certainly had something to do with why and how this young woman died after surviving being hit by a train, being nearly frozen, and then being supported by a loving family and community who helped raise funds for her to have her own adapted apartment and her own car. We can only surmise that, despite all this, Sarah simply did not feel valued. Despite all that love and

support from her community, the world beyond was not ready for her, the same world that so many young women with disabilities aspire to be part of.

Our newest project, funded by Status of Women Canada, is called “Legislation, Policy and Service Responses to Violence Against Women with Disabilities and Deaf Women”. It is the result of three years of community consultations with women with disabilities in 13 communities across Canada. They are tired of sharing their stories and repeating over and over that they are not getting the support they need.

We have undertaken this project in Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia and have already begun to see strong evidence that affirms the enormous gaps in policies and program delivery for women and girls with disabilities. Policies tend to be reactive, if they exist at all; legislation specific to disability—we have 10 years with the AODA in Ontario—is not applied from a gendered perspective; and any policies that appear to have merit are generally just that: well-written policies with no champions, no funding, and therefore no programs, no services, or none specifically for our needs, and no results.

In today's high-tech and social media world, the most at risk of being bullied or of being exploited online are girls with disabilities. Despite the incredible opportunities technology represents in supporting women and girls with disabilities, again there is no legislation or policy in place to protect our young women in this rapidly changing environment that dominates youth culture today.

Coming back to my opening remarks, the rates of sexual violence, physical violence, verbal violence, and systemic violence are at least three times higher for young women and girls with disabilities. If we had the courage as

a country to really look at childhood sexual abuse and to gather that data, we would again be looking at the alarmingly high rates of sexual abuse among girl children with disabilities.

Last year CBC broke a story that got very little national attention: a young woman with an intellectual disability sexually assaulted on a public bus in Winnipeg while her support worker sat two seats ahead of her listening to music on her iPod. Our work with young women with intellectual disabilities has a strong correlation with this. What they have told us repeatedly is that they need to receive appropriate information about their sexual and reproductive rights and the supports they require to protect themselves and those rights.

From a recent study of women in prisons in Ontario, there are two important pieces of data to share with you today. What two things did all these women have in common? Again, 40% of all women incarcerated in prisons in Ontario have a history of childhood sexual abuse and a traumatic brain injury.

What are we doing at DAWN Canada? I'm very proud to share with all of you today a recent and exciting partnership that we have with the Girls Action Foundation, funded by a grant from the Canadian Women's Foundation, for the next four years. Focused on their nine- to thirteen-year-old girls programming, Girls Action Foundation and DAWN Canada will begin collaborating for the next four years to see the inclusion of girls with disabilities and deaf girls in these mainstream girls' programs. This is the most exciting "pay it forward" and positive project we will have done yet, and it means so much, because it is about our future, about girls with disabilities as confident leaders.

This kind of uptake of leadership, of accepting responsibility for all girls, is sadly lacking elsewhere. As I stand before you today, there is but a handful—and I really do mean a handful—of peer support groups for women with disabilities, and nothing for girls or young women with disabilities, nothing for those who are experiencing violence at the highest rates. How can this be?

All of us gathered here today and all of us in Canada must do better. This is about the collective responsibility each of us has. This is not DAWN Canada's job, my friend; it belongs to all of us.

I stand before you today without a brief because my organization is already pushing itself well beyond its capacity day in and day out, for more than 30 years now. A brief and more facts should not be what is required to move you today. Every human rights instrument, including the CEDAW, the CESCRCR, and the CRPD, and every review of Canada's performance under its human rights treaties affirms that Canada is failing women and girls with disabilities. According to the World Health Organization, we are the largest minority group in the world. According to the most recent human rights commission report for 2015, nearly 60% of all complaints received were disability-related.

Minister Qualtrough has been charged with developing national accessibility legislation, together with all of you in the coming two years. She and I and the millions of young women and girls with disabilities in Canada need your support, need your commitment.

I could not be more proud of the fact that Canada has finally stood up and taken real and meaningful collective responsibility for the exclusion and harm done to our indigenous peoples. I stand before you today to urge

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FEWO and all of its members to do the same for young women and girls with disabilities.

Thank you. *Merci.*