



Briefing Document

Title: Violence, Coercive Control & Economic Abuse Facing Women with Disabilities in Canada

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Executive Summary

Women with disabilities (WWDs) in Canada face disproportionately high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV), especially in the form of coercive control and economic/financial abuse. Existing legal frameworks, social services, and financial systems inadequately recognise or respond to their unique vulnerabilities. The following document synthesises findings across three key sources mentioned below, with additional sources. The goal here is to do a summary gaps-analysis, and offers targeted policy recommendations to enhance equity, autonomy, and access to justice for WWDs.

Source & Methodology

This summary draws on three major documents and additional sources including one source in [Australian](#), with additional references provided. While limited, these findings offer important comparative insights relevant for Canada. The methodology involves qualitative and quantitative data, human rights frameworks, and legal analysis.



- A factum submitted by DisAbled Women's Network Canada (DAWN) in the Ahluwalia v. Ahluwalia appeal before Supreme Court of Canada, which addresses legal frameworks for WWDs in cases of IPV and coercive control. [Supreme Court of Canada](#)
- A 2021 report by the UNSW Gendered Violence Research Network (Australia) on economic/financial abuse (EFA) in domestic violence contexts for persons with disabilities.
- A first-person reflective article by Rose Solovitch about the intersection of disability and economic abuse in intimate relationships from the [Canadian Centre for Women's Empowerment](#)

Thematic Findings

1. Disproportionate Victimization & Coercive Control

- WWDs experience IPV at a rate of about 55 % in Canada vs ~37 % for non-disabled women. [Supreme Court of Canada+2Supreme Court of Canada+2](#)
- Coercive control includes patterns of behaviour such as withholding medical care, restricting mobility aids, isolating socially, and financial exploitation tied to disability-dependency.
- Abuse often worsens existing disabilities or creates new harms (e.g., traumatic brain injury, exacerbated chronic conditions). [Supreme Court of Canada+1](#)
- Social isolation due to disability serves as a fertile ground for abuse: abusers exploit the victim's restricted access to networks and services (Solovitch article).

2. Economic & Financial Abuse (EFA)



- WWDs are subject to unique tactics of economic abuse: misuse/control of disability benefits/supports, denial of employment opportunities, exploitation by caregivers or institutional staff.
- Strong evidence gaps exist: inconsistent definitions of “disability”, lack of disability-specific EFA research. (UNSW report)
- Dependence on partners or caregivers for access to funds, transportation, care, etc., increases vulnerability and reduces ability to leave abusive relationships.

3. Legal & Systemic Barriers

- Legal frameworks (criminal, civil, tort, family law) are fragmented and typically designed for incident-based physical assault, not prolonged patterns of coercion especially tailored to disability dynamics. [Canadian Women's Foundation+1](#)
- Stereotypes and ableism undermine credibility of WWDs in legal proceedings (e.g., perceived as less competent, non-ideal victims). [Supreme Court of Canada](#)
- Courts frequently misinterpret caregiving relationships and view the non-disabled partner favourably (“halo effect”), masking abusive behaviour.
- Human rights obligations (via the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) require gender equality, access to justice, protection from exploitation, respect for autonomy - but these obligations are not fully realised for WWDs. [Supreme Court of Canada+1](#)

4. Intersectional Vulnerabilization:

- Disability intersects with gender, class, race, and institutional context, compounding risk.
- WWDs may be excluded from research or services (e.g., surveys omit institutionalised persons) and face additional barriers in accessing supports.



- Caregiver-partner abuse and institutional/guardian abuse raises complex power dynamics.

Policy Recommendations

Below are key policy recommendations tailored for the Canadian context:

1. Define and Recognise Disability-Specific Economic Abuse

- Develop clear definitions that distinguish EFA tactics specific to disability (e.g., control of benefits, mobility aids).
- Integrate disability-specific measures into national surveys and research frameworks.

2. Create a Unified Tort for Coercive Control

- Reform civil law to establish a single coherent tort for coercive and controlling behaviour (including financial, psychological, disability-specific control) so WWDs don't have to chase multiple legal claims.
- Ensure the tort accounts for disability-related harms and dependency dynamics.
- Align legislation with UNCRCPD obligations (Arts. 6, 13, 16, 23).
[Supreme Court of Canada](#)

3. Strengthen Access to Justice & Disability-Informed Legal Processes

- Provide training to judges, lawyers, support workers, and courts on disability dynamics in IPV and coercive control.
- Lower evidentiary thresholds or adjust legal processes to account for non-typical responses to abuse (e.g., delay in reporting, dependent relationships).
- Ensure accessibility of legal services for WWDs (physical, communication, cognitive).

4. Enhance Financial Institution & Disability Service Sector Responses



- Mandate banks and financial institutions to adopt policies to identify signs of EFA for people with disabilities (e.g., unusual transactions involving disability benefits).
- Require disability support services, guardianship systems and housing providers to institute abuse-prevention protocols, particularly financial exploitation by caregivers.

5. Improve Data Collection and Research

- Invest federal/provincial/territorial funding for longitudinal studies on WWDs and IPV/EFA, including institutionalised settings.
- Ensure data disaggregation by disability type, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status.

6. Promote Economic Independence for WWDs

- Expand employment supports, accessible workplace accommodations, and targeted programs to reduce financial dependence on abusive partners.
- Guarantee accessible housing and transportation to support autonomy and the ability to leave abusive relationships.

7. Embed Intersectional Approaches in Policy

- Ensure policies recognise overlapping forms of discrimination (ableism, sexism, racism, poverty) and are co-designed with disabled persons and WWDs.
- Tailor responses for institutional settings (e.g., residential care, guardianship systems) where WWDs may be at heightened risk.

Implementation Considerations

- **Collaboration:** Cross-sector collaboration between justice, disability services, financial institutions, housing, employment, and women's violence/violence prevention sectors.



- **Budgeting & Resourcing:** Allocate funds for training, research, service adaptation, and legal reform.
- **Evaluation & Accountability:** Establish metrics to evaluate policy impact (e.g., reduced IPV/EFA rates among WWDs; improved legal outcomes).
- **Inclusive Design:** Ensure policies and services are designed with and for WWDs (including those with cognitive, sensory, or mobility disabilities).
- **Avoiding Harm:** Reform must avoid unintended consequences (e.g., over-criminalisation, increased surveillance of marginalised communities) — see caution in Canadian policy brief on criminalising coercive control. [Canadian Women's Foundation](#)

Conclusion

The evidence is clear: women with disabilities face systemic and severe forms of intimate partner violence, economic abuse, and coercive control. Our current legal, financial and service infrastructures are insufficiently tailored to meet their needs. Through dedicated definitions, legal reform, enhanced access to justice, financial safeguards, and intersectional policy design, Canada can move toward fulfilling its commitment to dignity, autonomy and equality for WWDs.



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