Ashley Stephen:

The abuse starts slowly. Eventually, you start to wonder if something’s… off. But, no, surely it’s just your mind playing tricks on you. Again.

Your worry grows as time goes on. You finally find a way to verbalise what is happening, and you’re met with disbelief, with statements like:

“You should be happy anyone is putting up with you, your partner is a saint for dealing with your disabilities day after day.”

Surely others would see if this was abuse. After all, the cuts, the bruises could be due to clumsiness from Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. It must be in your head, like all those hallucinations. So you stop talking.

We are Disabled Survivors Unite. A UK organisation founded of a realisation that disabled victims and survivors are often ignored in the fights against abuse and sexual violence. We work with existing services to make sure their work is done with us in mind. After all, we are over 3.5 times more likely to be victims of a violent crime. These testimonies are a mixture of personal experiences and stories shared with us by disabled survivors. All names have been changed.

I was abused. I tried to reach out and was ignored. The side effects of the abuse were seen simply as my “autism getting worse”. Even though the stress caused my immune system to shut down further, there could be no solving my case. I couldn’t be abused by my partner – I was disabled.

Through Disabled Survivors Unite, we have found that stories like mine are incredibly common. The threads connecting them are an unwillingness to believe and the utilisation of disabilities in perpetrating abuse. Inducing non-verbal states, withholding care, food, and medication, and prying on the isolation of disabled individuals are some of the more common examples.

These forms of abuse are not often recognised in the eyes of the law and can be perpetrated by romantic partners, family members, carers, and institutions.

Holly Scott-Gardner:

The domestic abuse disabled people experience is often not recognised by care providers, support services, and even friends and family. So often it manifests in an unconventional way that others have not seen before, or are unaware is a form of abuse. We are taught to look for warning signs, but if you don't know what they are how can you do that?

In the last few months alone I have talked with countless survivors who's abuse was ignored, or grossly misunderstood. They have told me about wheelchairs and other necessary equipment being damaged to prevent them leaving the house, benefits money going to a partner who withheld it from them and being abused, and the physical affects of that abuse being hidden by their abuser who blame it on their clumsiness which is a symptom of their disability.

I spoke to one survivor called Jade who told me that she was abused by her personal assistant. She spoke to her social worker to request a change in her care provider, but this request was denied. The social worker told her that if she did not have carers she would not be allowed to leave the house on her own. If she did so, she would end up being raped. The social worker said this knowing that Jade had been raped as a child.

During our conversation she said: "I allowed these people into my home, people I thought I could trust, and they abused me. Unless you’ve been through it, you’ll never understand the impact that this has on a person. The abuse may have stopped, but it never really ends."

Another survivor reached out to us, saying that for a long time they didn't know they were being raped by their partner. Abuse is very subtle, and processing things literally due to their autism meant that they could not identify what was happening as abuse until others around them reacted with surprise and horror. They blamed themselves and their disability for sensory overload when being touched by their partner.

Victim blaming is a pervasive aspect of rape culture, and when combined with ableism it can prevent a disabled person who is experiencing domestic abuse from coming forward. We are so often taught that our disabilities are inconvenient, that they cause all of our problems, and it can be easy to blame terrible things that happen to us on the fact that we are disabled. It can be hard to recognise that we are not the problem, that we are not the one to blame.

I hope these testimonies send a strong message that disabled people are often forgotten in conversations of domestic abuse. People are quick to pin the affects of that abuse on the persons disability, and so it continues.

The warning signs are there. They are clear to see if only we will look for them.

Bekki Smiddy:

One in five people are disabled. Why is it assumed that disabled people are not victims of violence and abuse too?

One of our most harrowing stories stated: “For me being in an abusive relationship meant always feeling like I had to make up for the crime of being disabled.”

The recognition that disabled people both experience domestic abuse and experience it at a disproportionately higher rate needs to be embedded in policy, legislation and services, rather than an afterthought.

Imagine finally escaping your abuser, only to be shuffled from woman’s refuge to woman’s refuge. Simply because not a single one was wheelchair accessible. Faye had to be carried upstairs. Eventually she had no other choice than to go against the police’s advice and return to her adapted and wheelchair friendly home. This is where she had previously lived with her abusive partner. The police were unable to provide accessible accommodation, but still told her not to return and that in doing so she was “asking for trouble”. We were helping Faye find an accessible counselling service, but the police told her (against their own policies) that she wasn’t allowed to access that support. She told us “I’ve lost all faith, I asked so many people for help on a number of occasions, and they all let me down. I saved myself.”

There is only one specialist domestic violence service for deaf people in the UK. There is only one specialist service designed to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities.

I cannot tell you how many safe houses and refuges are accessible in the UK, because there is not currently data on that, though we are trying to do research.

Moreover, 17 percent of refuges have been forced to close because of funding cuts. Local cuts have fallen most harshly people from minority ethnic communities, LGBTQ women, and disabled women.

Imagine finally gathering the courage to ask for help, only to be told that your experiences don’t count as abuse.

“My mental illness was used to make out that I was a liar and morally bankrupt. I had to run away to a new city to start again. Of course, my mental health problems were made far worse by my experiences and the PTSD morphed into Enduring Personality Change After Catastrophic Experience. I honestly believe that had I not had PTSD and hyper mobility a lot of his excuses would not have been as readily believed. I am sure that my evidence wouldn't have been practically ignored because I was ‘too emotional’.”

This is what Tom told us about his experiences with the UK legal system. The courts frequently discriminate against using our disability against us, framing us unreliably witnesses because of our conditions.

Institutional abuse is overwhelmingly experienced by disabled people. Yet this is left off of the majority of safeguarding techniques and there is an obviously lack of specific legislation protecting people with disabilities from violence. Although in the UK domestic violence legislation has been reformed following the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act of 2004 and the Serious Crime Bill of 2015, there are often amendments made that damage the rights of disabled people.

Imogen contacted us with her experience of institutional abuse: “An institution failed to keep me safe, put my life in danger, then punished me for it, making my condition worse. I will never get my health back. I just can’t go back. And worst still, they don’t even recognise the abuse they inflicted or the damage they caused me.

All I can remember of that time is flashes of things, my bed and pain. I’d wake up on the wet, cold ground time and time again, and I couldn’t remember how I got there or why I was there. I can still taste the dirt and leaves in my mouth and the wetness soaking into my jeans. I walked into walls, into the road, I was hit by moving vehicles. When I finally told someone, he told me I was being lazy, that I was making things up to get out of work. I’m sick of being told that my experiences are invalid just because people can’t be bothered to understand.”

We require a needs-led approach, with user-led organisations at the heart of development. The experiences of survivors, disabled or otherwise, should be central to how we deal with domestic violence.

Alice Kirby:

We support services to become accessible by offering consultancy and training, but the barrier that comes up time and time again is money.

Many of services we work with are struggling to operate on the budget that they already have, they simply can’t afford to make adaptions to their buildings or redesign their services to become inclusive.

The UK government urgently need to reverse the cuts that have left these services underfunded. And they need to inject more money into them so they can afford to become accessible to disabled people.

It is also important to recognise the effect of austerity and welfare reform. In recent years social security for disabled people has been cut significantly. And we know that the poorer a person is, the less likely it is they will escape abuse.

The closure of the Independent Living Fund and further cuts to social services has had a detrimental affect on those of us who require assistance and support.

In turn, people who rely on their abusers for care are less likely to be able to leave. It also means social services are failing to protect people like Jade.

There is a housing crisis and limited accessible accommodation which forces people to remain in abusive relationships. One person said to us: “I didn't have anywhere else to go, the only choice I had was homelessness with four children.”

Others who are able to escape abuse, like Faye, have to remain in the homes where they previously lived with their abuser, and this is compromises their safety.

Ultimately it must be recognised that the welfare reforms the UK government have implemented are a targeted attack on disabled people.

Not only do they perpetuate domestic violence by making it incredibly difficult for victims to leave their abusive partners, but these policies in themselves are abusive.

A few months ago the UN declared that the reforms made by UK government are a violation of disabled people’s human rights. Ministers refused to accept this or its recommendations.

In conclusion, we identify three key changes needed to protect and support disabled survivors in our country.

Firstly, government need to urgently assess the impact of welfare reform and recognise how living in these circumstances prevents disabled people from escaping abuse.

Secondly, government need to invest long term funding into support services across the country which will enable them to help disabled survivors.

And thirdly, government need to acknowledge the failings outlined by the UN’s report and follow out its recommendations. We deserve to have our human rights back.

Until these changes are made, our government will remain complicit in the abuse of disabled people.

We want equality, nothing more, nothing less. And we will continue to campaign until this achieved.

Thank you.