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# Disabled Women and Austerity

*Briefing from the UK Women's Budget Group  
on the impact of austerity on disabled women*

**October 2018**

## Austerity and disabled women

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### Key points

- There are 14 million disabled people in the UK: **20% of men and 23% of women are disabled**. Overall, 36% of households in the UK have a disabled person.
- **50.7% of disabled people were employed** but they were **more likely to be underemployed and in low-paid jobs**.
- **Disabled women earn less (22.1%) than non-disabled men**, a gender pay gap four percentage points higher than between all men and women. Disabled women earn 11.8% less than disabled men.
- Poverty rates have been increasing since 2010 and now **26% of households with a disabled person are in poverty**, compared to 22% in the overall population. This figure is likely to underestimate poverty rates of disabled households as it does not take into account **additional costs associated with disability, estimated at £570 per month**.
- Multiple changes since 2010 reduced the generosity and the scope of disability and incapacity benefits. This has a disproportionate impact on women as disabled women are majority of claimants (55%).
- **Benefit sanctions have increased in recent years but the vast majority of sanctions and decisions not to grant disability benefits are overturned on appeal**: 63% of PIP cases and 60% of ESA cases are ruled in favour of the claimant. Changes to legal aid saw a sharp decrease of 99% of disability-related cases receiving legal aid support.
- **Disabled people have been disproportionately affected by austerity cuts since 2010**. Disabled women are set to lose 13% of their annual net income by 2021 from cumulative tax-benefit changes.
- **Disabled Lone mothers lose out the most from tax and benefit changes since 2010; by 2021 they will lose 21% of their net income if they do not have a disabled child and 32% if they do**. A third of this loss is due to shift to UC.
- Spending cuts to adult social care and housing support has also affected disabled people disproportionately.
- Disabled people experience domestic violence at twice the rate as non-disabled people. **One in two disabled women experience domestic violence in their lifetime** and they face additional barriers in seeking help and support.

There are about 14 million disabled people living in the UK.<sup>1</sup> 23% of all adults and 8% of children have a disability; 20% of men and 23% of women are disabled. Overall, 36% of households in the UK had a disabled person in 2016.<sup>2</sup>

Disabled people still have lower employment prospects than non-disabled people. The support they receive from social security benefits is crucial to meet additional daily expenses and live with dignity. Disabled people also depend more on public services such as health and social care. Austerity cuts to public spending, both in benefits and in public services, have had a disproportionate impact on disabled individuals.

<sup>1</sup> A person is considered to be disabled if they report a long-standing illness, disability or impairment which causes substantial difficulty with day-to-day activities, as defined by the Equality Act 2010. Both the Family Resources Survey and the Labour Market Survey identify individuals with disability through self-reporting against a set of criteria based on this definition.

In the next sections we give an overview of the situation of disabled people as relates to different policy aspects, focusing on disabled women when disaggregated data is available.

### Employment and earnings

Disabled people are much less likely to be in employment than people without disabilities, they are paid less and they experience significant barriers in finding and staying in work.

In 2018, an estimated 3.8 million disabled people of working age were in paid employment.<sup>3</sup> 50.7% of disabled people were employed compared to 81.1% of non-disabled people.<sup>4</sup> The employment rates for

<sup>2</sup> Data from the Family Resources survey 2016-17 (<http://bit.ly/2xJFIm1>)

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Library (2018) *People with disabilities in employment* (<http://bit.ly/2NFL5YQ>)

<sup>4</sup> ONS (2018) *Labour market status of disabled people. August 2018: table A08: economic activity of people with disabilities* (<http://bit.ly/2Oh7GQu>)

disabled women and disabled men is currently the same. Disabled women's employment rate increased from 41.9% in April-June 2013 to 50.7% in April-June 2018, a faster growth rate than men's.<sup>5</sup>

This average employment rate masks differences between types of impairment. 68% of people with difficulty in hearing were employed, whereas less than a quarter of people with severe or specific learning difficulties, mental health conditions and a speech impediment had a paid job.<sup>6</sup>

Disabled people are also more likely to be underemployed and to be in low-paid jobs. Disabled people earn 15% less than non-disabled people, equivalent to £2,730 per year.<sup>7</sup> This pay gap has been growing for the last three years. The fact that more disabled people work part-time and in lower-paid occupations (e.g. machine operatives, administrative and secretarial jobs, caring and leisure and sales and customer services) contributes to this pay gap.<sup>8</sup> Disabled people tend to have lower educational qualifications – however, disabled people with similar levels of qualification earn less than their non-disabled counterparts. Disabled people still face a degree of pay discrimination.<sup>9</sup>

Compared to non-disabled male employees, disabled women earn 22.1% less on average per hour, a pay gap that is four percentage points higher than that between non-disabled women and men.<sup>10</sup> Disabled women earn 11.8% less than disabled men.

In 2018, the UN recommended the UK government to develop an employment strategy for disabled people, focusing particularly on women with disabilities, people with psychosocial and/intellectual disabilities and persons with visual impairments, in line with the government's pledge to increase the number of disabled people in employment by a million over a decade.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> ONS (2018) A08: *Labour market status of disabled people* (<http://bit.ly/2Oh7GQu>)

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Library (2018) *People with disabilities in employment* (<http://bit.ly/2NFL5YQ>)

<sup>7</sup> TUC (2018) *Disability employment and pay gaps 2018* (<http://bit.ly/2yscwzA>)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> UK Independent Mechanism (2018) *Update report to the UM Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (<http://bit.ly/2QGIII7>)

There are two national schemes to improve disabled people's access to paid employment. Disability Confident is a programme to help employers improve recruitment and retention of disabled workers and Access to Work (AtW) supports employees meeting additional costs of getting to work related to their disability.<sup>12</sup> The benefits of AtW to society have been found to outweigh the costs of the programme,<sup>13</sup> and a crucial tool to meet the government's target of reducing the unemployment rate of disabled people.

## Poverty

Disabled people are at a higher risk of poverty. The IFS found for example that people aged 25-54 with a long-standing illness are 50% more likely to live in poverty than those without.<sup>14</sup>

There has been a reduction in the at-risk-of-poverty rate of disabled people in the last two decades. However, since 2011/12 the relative income poverty rate has been increasing and in 2016/17, 26% of individuals living in households with a disabled member were at risk of poverty (relative low income after housing costs), up three percentage points. This compares to 20% of those in households without any disabled member in 2016/17.<sup>15</sup>

The calculation of these official poverty figures does not consider the additional costs of disability, even though disability benefits to help meet those costs are counted as additional income.

Partly in response to this flaw, the Social Metrics Commission has proposed a new poverty measure that takes into account disability costs (along with available non-income resources such as liquid assets).<sup>16</sup> With this new measure, the poverty rate of working-age adults in households with a disabled member rises from 29% to 31% whereas it falls from 18% to 17% for those in households where no one is disabled. The poverty rate for children in households

<sup>12</sup> House of Commons Library (2018) *People with disabilities in employment* (<http://bit.ly/2NFL5YQ>)

<sup>13</sup> RNIB (2015) *Access to Work – Cost benefit analysis* (<http://bit.ly/2Al45rR>)

<sup>14</sup> IFS (2018) *Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2018* (<http://bit.ly/2Eg8qk7>) p 59

<sup>15</sup> DWP (2018) Estimated percentage of individuals in relative/ absolute low income, 1994/95-2016/17 <https://bit.ly/2NKBvIS>

<sup>16</sup> See report by The Social Metrics Commission (2018) *A new measure for poverty for the UK* (<http://bit.ly/2QYzTsg>)

where someone is disabled is 41% in this new measure, compared to 29% for children in households where no one is disabled.<sup>17</sup>

However, even this new measure may underestimate the number of disabled people in poverty, since it uses disability benefits received as a proxy for disability costs. Because some of these disability benefits were cut or frozen since 2010 while living costs have increased they do not reflect the true extent of extra costs that disabled people face. Scope has estimated that disabled people face extra costs of £570 on average a month related to their impairment or condition.<sup>18</sup> For example, current rates of the Personal Independence Payment (PIP), a non-means-tested benefit to support people with the additional costs of a disability, are from £248.3 standard rate to £370.93 enhanced rate a month (£57.30-£85.60 per week),<sup>19</sup> which fall short of the estimated extra disability costs.

### *Changes to disability and incapacity benefits*

The social security safety net for many disabled people has been weakened by spending cuts since 2010.<sup>20</sup> In 2018, the Council of Europe concluded that the UK does not conform to the right to social security under the European Social Charter because levels of statutory sick pay, minimum Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and long-term incapacity and unemployment entitlements are lower than 40% of the median income.<sup>21</sup>

Although the current four-year freeze on working-age benefits did not extend to disability benefits, multiple changes since 2010 reduced the generosity and the scope of these benefits through a combination of changes to uprating and to eligibility conditions.

Women are hit both as claimants and as carers. 55% of PIP claimants are women and 58% of carers are women (60% among those caring for more than 50 hours per week).<sup>22</sup>

The means-tested component of ESA (which is being absorbed by Universal Credit) is affected by the recent freeze. Moreover the previous Coalition government reduced its award amount by aligning it to Jobseeker's Support Allowance (JSA). The contributory element of ESA is limited to one year since the 2010 June Budget.

### *Sanctions and access to justice*

Since 2012, the number of sanctions to benefit claimants has risen considerably, reaching a peak of one million in 2013. Sanctions are applied as a punishment when claimants infringe the conditions of their payments (e.g. failing to apply for jobs or missing appointments).

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) is a benefit for disabled or ill people who are unable or less able to work. Claimants go through a Work Capability Assessment and those deemed able to work are expected to have regular interviews with an adviser and to look for a job. Personal Independence Payment (PIP) is to support individuals meeting the extra costs caused by disability or long-term ill-health. Although non-conditional (with respect to employment), eligibility is subject to an assessment and usually periodic reviews. For both types of benefits, claimants can appeal if they believe the sanction or decision to withdraw a benefit was erroneous or unfair.

A majority of appeals in tribunals are successful: in 2017/18, 66% of PIP appeals and 68% of ESA appeals went in favour of claimants.<sup>23</sup> 290,000 claimants since 2013 only received correct PIP and ESA awards after challenging DWP's initial decision.<sup>24</sup>

Unemployed disabled claimants, claiming Jobseeker's Allowance, were found to be 53% more likely to be sanctioned than non-disabled peers,<sup>25</sup> which raises serious concerns of discrimination and violation of disabled people's rights to social security and an adequate standard of living.<sup>26</sup>

There is strong evidence that sanctions are ineffective in moving disabled people closer to paid work, instead

<sup>17</sup> The Social Metrics Commission (2018) *ibid.* and DWP (op. cit.)

<sup>18</sup> Scope (2018) *The disability price tag* (<http://bit.ly/2yluiik>)

<sup>19</sup> Child Poverty Action Group (2018) *Welfare Benefits and Tax Credits Handbook*, p 749

<sup>20</sup> See WBG briefing on social security for more (<http://bit.ly/2CTAFnw>)

<sup>21</sup> European Committee of Social Rights (2018) *36<sup>th</sup> national report on the implementation of the European Social Charter: Conclusions XXI-2* (2017)

<sup>22</sup> See Carers UK fact sheet (<http://bit.ly/2lCvN5d>)

<sup>23</sup> The Guardian (12 Feb 2018) 'DWP spent £100m on disability benefit appeals, figures reveal' (<http://bit.ly/2wlToGj>)

<sup>24</sup> House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee (2018) *PIP and ESA assessments* (<http://bit.ly/2A7npZQ>)

<sup>25</sup> The Guardian (18 Feb 2018) 'More than a million benefits sanctions imposed on disabled people since 2010' (<http://bit.ly/2PsdiUW>)

<sup>26</sup> Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, United Nations.

pushing them into poverty and exacerbating ill health.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, sanctions often encourage hostility towards support services and worsen relationships with job centre staff.<sup>28</sup>

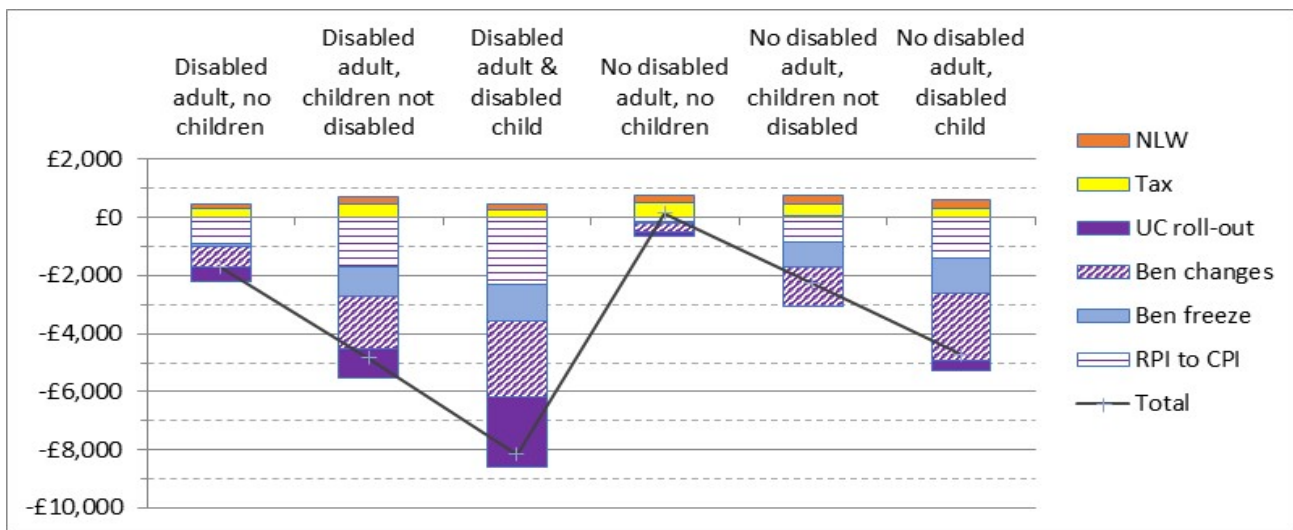
Appeals were made more difficult to launch after civil legal aid was severely cut in 2012.<sup>29</sup> Eligibility criteria were tightened, leaving only the very poor access to it.<sup>30</sup> Social security benefits were removed from the scope of legal aid, which has exacerbated the impact of cuts to social security benefits.<sup>31</sup> There has been an astonishing 99% decrease in support by the Legal Aid Agency for clients with disability-related benefits, from 29,801 to 308 (2011/12 to 2016/17).<sup>32</sup>

### The cumulative impact of austerity on incomes

Changes to taxes and benefits since 2010 have affected disabled people disproportionately. The

Women’s Budget Group, using the Landman Economics model, has calculated the 2010-2021 cumulative impact of tax and benefit changes on households’ net income by the presence of a disabled child or adult (Figure 1). Households with at least one disabled adult and a disabled child are set to lose over £8,000 a year by April 2021 (over 18% of their net income). Households with children with either a disabled adult or a disabled child are set to lose nearly £4,800 and £4,700 respectively, about 10% of their net income. This means that households with a disabled child are set to lose twice as much as households with non-disabled children, regardless of whether there is a disabled adult or not.

Figure 1. Cumulative annual impact of tax and benefit changes since 2010 on households’ net income by April 2021 by the presence of a disabled adult or child and type of change.



Source: WBG calculations using the Landman Economics tax-benefit model (policy announcements as of October 2017)

Table 1 shows that, once again, lone mothers are set to lose the most from the cumulative tax-benefit changes since 2010. Disabled lone mothers stand to lose £7,224 per year by April 2021 (26% of their net income) if they do not have a disabled child, and £10,506 (32%) if they do. Non-disabled lone mothers

with a disabled child are also set to lose £7,221 (24% of their net income). For disabled lone mothers, around a third of the cuts comes from the switch from legacy benefits to Universal Credit (see below). These figures compare to non-disabled lone mothers

<sup>27</sup> Welfare Conditionality Project (2018) *Final findings report* (<http://bit.ly/2MHBrk>)

<sup>28</sup> EHRC (2018) *The impact of welfare reform and welfare-to-work programmes: an evidence review* (<http://bit.ly/2pQWcEG>)

<sup>29</sup> Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012

<sup>30</sup> K Sandhu, MA Stephenson, J Harrison (2013) *Layers of Inequality – A Human Rights and Equality Impact Assessment of the Public Spending Cuts on Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Women in Coventry*, pp 63-64.

<sup>31</sup> EHRC (2018) *The impact of LASPO on routes to justice* (<http://bit.ly/2OVX8FT>)

<sup>32</sup> House of Commons (2018) *Legal aid scheme: social security benefits: written question – 130690*; also Zacchaeus 2000 Trust (2018) *Access Denied – Barriers to justice in the disability benefits system* (<http://bit.ly/2CJrbej>)

with no disabled child, set to lose £4,640 a year (17%).

The shift from legacy benefits to Universal Credit (UC) will have a particular negative impact on households with children that have a disabled adult. UC-entitled households with non-disabled children but with a disabled adult stand to lose an additional £1,300 per annum by 2021 when migrated into UC, and those with both a disabled child and a disabled adult an additional £3,000. This contrasts to a net additional gain of £300 for UC-entitled households with children where no one is disabled.<sup>33</sup>

The National Audit Office has also found that the DWP is not doing enough to support vulnerable claimants with difficulties during the implementation of Universal Credit, including disabled people.<sup>34</sup>

There have been concerns expressed by several victim support and women's organisations about the design of Universal Credit and financial abuse.<sup>35</sup> The fact that the UC is paid into a single bank account poses risks of financial abuse for women due to power imbalances in the family.<sup>36</sup> These can be especially acute for disabled women, who already face high levels of domestic violence (see below).<sup>37</sup>

### Public services: social care and housing

Spending cuts on public services also affect disabled people disproportionately. The detrimental impact of drastic cuts to social care funding is compounded by the fact that social care does not always sufficiently consider disabled adults of working age.<sup>38</sup>

Finding accessible housing is a significant concern for disabled people too. In England, only 7% of homes offer minimal accessibility features.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> WBG calculations using the Landman tax-benefit model

<sup>34</sup> NAO (2018) *Rolling out Universal Credit* (<http://bit.ly/2NF2noz>)

<sup>35</sup> Women's Budget Group (2018) *Universal Credit & Financial Abuse: Exploring the links* (<http://bit.ly/2OITWnH>)

<sup>36</sup> Women Enabled International and Sisters of Frida (2016) *Joint Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review: The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland - Third Cycle* (<http://bit.ly/2GP59Jq>)

<sup>37</sup> Public Health England (2015) *Disability and domestic abuse: Risk, impacts and response* (<http://bit.ly/2ILYSc>)

Table 1. Cumulative annual impact of tax and benefit changes since 2010 on households' net income by April 2021 by the presence of a disabled adult or child and gendered household type (working-age)

|                                 | real-term cash | % of net hh income |
|---------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| Single woman, disabled          | -£3,000        | -16%               |
| Single woman, not disabled      | -£27           | 0%                 |
| Single man, disabled            | -£2,954        | -15%               |
| Single man, not disabled        | -£186          | -1%                |
| Lone mother dis.; no dis. chi.  | -£7,224        | -26%               |
| Lone mother dis.; dis. child    | £10,509        | -32%               |
| Lone mot. no dis.; no dis. chi. | -£4,640        | -17%               |
| Lone mother no dis.; dis. chi   | -£7,221        | -24%               |
| Couple w/o chi, dis. adult      | -£1,245        | -4%                |
| Couple w/o chi, no dis. adult   | £480           | 1%                 |
| Couple, dis. adult; no dis. chi | -£4,078        | -9%                |
| Couple, dis. adult; dis. child  | -£7,182        | -16%               |
| Couple, no dis.; no dis. chi    | -£1,742        | -3%                |
| Couple, no dis.; dis. chi       | -£3,693        | -7%                |

Source: WBG calculations using the Landman Economics tax-benefit model (policy announcements as of October 2017)

### Violence against disabled women

Due to their higher vulnerability, disabled people experience domestic abuse at double the rate of non-disabled people. During their lifetime, one in two disabled women experiences domestic violence in the UK, while one in four women overall does.

A review from Public Health England found that 15.7% of disabled women in England experienced domestic violence in 2015/16, compared to 6.2% non-disabled women.<sup>40</sup> Disabled women face higher levels of violence than disabled men, and more severe abuse.<sup>41</sup> This high prevalence of violence

<sup>38</sup> See WBG pre-Budget briefing (2018) on social care

(<http://bit.ly/2PjJyMC>)

<sup>39</sup> EHRC (2018) *Housing and disabled people: the role of local authorities* (<http://bit.ly/2PwpfJ0>)

<sup>40</sup> ONS (2017) *Crime Statistics, Focus on Violent Crime and Sexual Offences, 2015/16*. Chapter 4: Domestic abuse, sexual assault and stalking (<http://bit.ly/2pNfTx6>)

<sup>41</sup> Public Health England (2015) *Disability and domestic abuse: Risk, impacts and response* (<http://bit.ly/2ILYSc>)

experienced by disabled women is compounded by the increased difficulty of leaving an abusive relationship; sometimes the abuser is also the caregiver. The type of violence suffered is often related to their condition, including the withholding of medicine and food, or non-provision of help for other personal needs.<sup>42</sup>

Disabled women may be particularly at risk of financial abuse – in the form of financial coercion at the hands of family and intimate partners – both because of their disability and because of the disability benefits they receive.<sup>43</sup> Relatives and partners often control access to benefits that women are entitled to because of their disability, increasing their isolation. This control not only leads to financial abuse against disabled women but may also make it harder for them to leave abusive relationships because of both safety concerns and lack of financial resources.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, care packages are not portable so disabled women might be trapped in not being able to move because the care package is tied to the borough where they live. Availability of accessible accommodation is also crucial in disabled women's decision to leave an abusive relationship.<sup>45</sup>

Austerity cuts to local authorities and public services have severely reduced funding available for women's organisations and many were forced to close.<sup>46</sup> The ones that exist are often not fully accessible for disabled women, with half of the services (including shelters, advice centres, helplines, etc) not accessible to women with visual impairments and only partially accessible to wheelchair users, for example.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

Disabled women still face considerable challenges in living an autonomous, safe and dignified life. Those

in paid employment face low pay prospects. Extra living costs of all disabled people are often not sufficiently met by disability benefits. Disabled people are thus more likely to live in poverty. Austerity cuts have had a disproportionate impact on disabled women, in particular disabled lone mothers and lone mothers with a disabled child. Disabled women face higher rates of domestic violence, often specific to their disability, including withholding of money from benefits. Given their higher vulnerability to domestic violence and abuse, the design of UC raises concerns of risk of financial abuse for disabled women in particular.

In order to meet the UN recommendations of guaranteeing human rights for all, the government should provide greater financial support to disabled people to achieve adequate living standards, including support towards additional costs, as well as access to decent employment for those who can work and to high quality social care services.

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### UK Women's Budget Group, October 2018.

WBG is an independent, voluntary organisation made up of individuals from Academia, NGOs and trade unions. See [www.wbg.org.uk](http://www.wbg.org.uk)

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<sup>42</sup> Women Enabled International and Sisters of Frida (op. cit.)

<sup>43</sup> Women's Aid and TUC (2014) *Unequal, Trapped & Controlled: Women's experience of financial abuse and potential implications for Universal Credit* (<http://bit.ly/2zaUdGz>)

<sup>44</sup> Women Enabled International and Sisters of Frida (op. cit.)

<sup>45</sup> EHRC (2018) *Housing and disabled people: what should local authorities do?* (<http://bit.ly/2Cxen9P>)

<sup>46</sup> WBG and Runnymede (2017) *Intersecting Inequalities* (<http://bit.ly/2iLave5>)

<sup>47</sup> Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights and queraum cultural and social research (2014) *Access to specialised victim support services for women with disabilities who have experienced violence: final short report 23* (<http://bit.ly/2RQ5UUG>)