

Doubly Violated: «Extra-ordinary» Women Between Experiences of Discrimination, Violence, and Rebirth

Doppiamente violate: donne “stra-ordinarie” tra vissuti di discriminazioni, violenze e rinascite

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DOUBLE BLIND PEER REVIEW

ABSTRACT

Recent reports on violence, abuse, and discrimination against women (ISTAT, 2024) reveal a stark reality: women with disabilities face more than double the risk of experiencing violence (OSCAD, 2023) (Arconzo, 2023). This phenomenon illustrates a painful double discrimination, as these women are marginalized both as women and as individuals with disabilities. For women, achieving social recognition and a rightful place in society is already challenging; for women with disabilities, it is doubly so. Often misunderstood, disbelieved, or entirely unable to defend themselves or even recognize abuse and violence as such, these women face significant barriers. This paper aims to explore the educational value of the stories of extraordinary women, to restore dignity to their experiences, and to give voice to the many untold, whispered, or overlooked stories.

KEYWORDS

**Women with Disabilities, Extraordinary Stories, Gender Equality, Inclusion, Education.
Donne con disabilità, Storie Straordinarie, Parità di genere, Inclusione, Educazione.**

I dati degli ultimi report sulla violenza, gli abusi e le discriminazioni contro le donne (ISTAT, 2024) fanno emergere un quadro che vede un rischio più che raddoppiato (OSCAD, 2023) di subire violenza per le donne con disabilità (Arconzo, 2023). Assistingo, dolorosamente, a una doppia discriminazione in quanto donne e in quanto donne con disabilità. Se per le donne è già più complesso trovare posto e riconoscimento sociale, doppiamente complesso lo è per le donne con disabilità. A volte non comprese, persino non credute o totalmente impossibilitate a difendersi o riconoscere l'abuso, la violenza o violazione come tale. Il presente paper intende rintracciare il valore educativo di storie di donne straordinarie per restituire dignità a questi vissuti e dare voce alle molte storie taciute, raccontate sottovoce, non considerate.

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1. Introduction

The intersection of gender and disability presents a complex and multifaceted reality, particularly when discussing experiences of discrimination and violence. Women with disabilities are not only vulnerable to the same forms of gender-based violence as their able-bodied counterparts, but they also face additional layers of marginalization due to their disabilities. This creates a phenomenon of «double discrimination,» wherein these women are doubly marginalized based on both their gender and their physical, cognitive, or emotional impairments. Recent systematic reviews and studies, such as those by García-Cuéllar et al. (2023) and Mailhot Amborski et al. (2022), underscore the heightened vulnerability of women with disabilities, revealing that they are significantly more likely to experience intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, and other forms of gender-based violence compared to women without disabilities.

In a global analysis of violence prevention programs, Chirwa et al. (2020) highlight the pervasive nature of intimate partner violence (IPV) among women with disabilities, emphasizing that structural inequalities, such as the lack of accessible support services and societal biases, exacerbate their risk. This notion of compounded vulnerability is critical to understanding how social systems, from healthcare to the criminal justice system, often fail to protect women with disabilities, leaving them more susceptible to abuse while offering them fewer avenues for recourse.

The concept of «ableism» also intersects with sexism to create an even more entrenched system of oppression. Ableism, which privileges able-bodied individuals over those with disabilities, reinforces stereotypes that portray disabled women as weak, dependent, or incapable of advocating for themselves. This misconception not only heightens the risk of violence but also contributes to the disbelief, marginalization, and silencing of these women when they seek help or justice. Wiseman and Watson (2022) found that women with learning disabilities, in particular, face significant barriers to being taken seriously when reporting violence, leading to a systemic devaluation of their well-being and human rights.

These intersecting systems of oppression are not new, as Erevelles (2020) points out in her critical reflection on the intersections of gender, race, and disability, particularly in the context of violence. She argues that historical systems of patriarchy, colonialism, and ableism continue to perpetuate the invisibility and vulnerability of disabled women in both peacetime and wartime contexts.

In exploring the lives of women who have experienced these dual forms of discrimination and violence, it becomes clear that their stories are not just testimonies of suffering but also resilience. Ulivieri and Biemmi (2020) emphasize the importance of autobiographical storytelling as a means for women to reclaim their identities and challenge the social structures that have historically silenced them. In this context, the narratives of women with disabilities become powerful acts of resistance against the social invisibility and oppression they face.

A compelling literary parallel can be drawn to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which explores themes of invisibility, oppression, and resilience in the face of slavery. Like the character Sethe, who struggles to reclaim her sense of self after enduring years of systemic violence, women with disabilities must navigate a world that continually seeks to erase or diminish their identities. Sethe's eventual reclaiming of her agency and autonomy mirrors the struggle for visibility and recognition that disabled women experience in their fight against both gender-based violence and ableism.

By examining the lived experiences of women with disabilities through an intersectional lens, we gain a deeper understanding of how gender, disability, and other social identities work together to create compounded forms of discrimination. Through their resilience and narratives of survival, these women challenge the societal norms that seek to render them invisible, offering valuable insights into how educational and social systems must adapt to create more inclusive, equitable environments.

2. Double Discrimination: Gender and Disabilities

Double discrimination is a pervasive issue for women with disabilities, manifesting in various forms of exclusion, prejudice, and violence. Gender-based violence, which includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, is already a widespread problem for women globally. However, when compounded by disability, the risk of abuse increases significantly. According to Smith (2008), intimate partner violence is far more prevalent among women with disabilities, partly because they are perceived as more dependent, vulnerable, and easier to manipulate or control. This misconception arises from deep-rooted ableist stereotypes, which frame disabled individuals as inherently weaker or less capable of asserting their rights and autonomy.

Ableism, as a system of oppression, operates by devaluing the lives and experiences of disabled people. When combined with sexism, it creates a particularly harsh reality for disabled women, who are marginalized not only for their gender but also for their physical or cognitive impairments. Schaller and Fieberg (1998) highlight how this double marginalization reduces the likelihood of disabled women seeking help, as many feel isolated or de-

pendent on their abusers due to physical barriers or lack of accessible resources. Moreover, their testimonies are often disregarded or diminished because of societal biases that question their credibility or understanding of their own experiences.

In literature, the character of Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre* exemplifies the social and emotional isolation of women who are both mentally disabled and oppressed by a patriarchal system. Locked away in an attic, Bertha's plight underscores how disabled women are often hidden from public view and denied their humanity. Her «madness» is used as a justification for her confinement, much like how ableism and sexism work together to restrict the autonomy and visibility of disabled women. Marone (2023) critiques this intersection of ableism and patriarchy, noting that feminist movements have often failed to adequately address the unique struggles of disabled women. Similarly, Ulivieri (2022) calls for a «pedagogy of difference» that seeks to recognize and dismantle these interlocking systems of oppression through education and awareness.

Frida Kahlo's life and work provide a striking example of how disability and gender intersect to create a unique form of vulnerability but also resilience. Kahlo, who suffered from polio as a child and endured lifelong pain and physical limitations after a traumatic accident, experienced not only the physical challenges of disability but also the emotional toll of gender-based violence in her relationship with Diego Rivera. Her art, particularly her self-portraits, transforms her suffering into a profound narrative of survival, resistance, and self-reclamation. In works such as *The Broken Column*, Kahlo visualizes her fractured body while asserting her endurance, making her a powerful symbol for women with disabilities who resist the silencing and marginalization imposed on them.

3. Silence and Invisibility

Silence and invisibility are pervasive themes in the lives of women with disabilities, particularly those who have suffered abuse. The term «social invisibility» refers to the phenomenon in which certain individuals or groups are systematically ignored or overlooked by dominant social structures, often leading to a lack of recognition, representation, or advocacy for their needs. Women with disabilities, often perceived as passive or incapable of asserting their rights, face this social invisibility in numerous ways. Cambi (1994) discusses the «silences of theory,» where the experiences of marginalized groups, particularly disabled women, are absent from academic discourse, rendering their struggles and contributions largely invisible. This omission perpetuates the isolation of these women, denying them the visibility and recognition necessary for societal change.

A literary parallel can be found in Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. The mermaid sacrifices her voice in exchange for a chance to live as a human, but in doing so, she becomes mute and invisible, unable to communicate or assert her needs. This metaphor resonates deeply with the experiences of disabled women, who are often rendered voiceless by societal structures that fail to accommodate their disabilities or recognize their personhood. Similarly, Greenwood and Tudor (2024) argue that social systems and legal frameworks often fail to account for the specific challenges faced by disabled women, further entrenching their marginalization.

Ulivieri (2023) discusses how educational frameworks must evolve to recognize the unique experiences of women with disabilities, moving beyond traditional feminist discourse to include those who have been doubly marginalized. By acknowledging the intersection of gender and disability, educational systems can play a crucial role in dismantling the barriers that contribute to the social invisibility of these women. Loiodice (2023) emphasizes the importance of early childhood education in addressing gender inequality, advocating for gender-sensitive pedagogy that begins from a young age to challenge and disrupt harmful stereotypes.

The theme of silence is also present in Frida Kahlo's work, particularly in pieces like *The Two Fridas*, where she depicts herself in two forms—one healthy, one broken—connected by a lifeline of blood. This duality represents the internal conflict many disabled women face, torn between societal expectations of normalcy and their own lived realities of pain and limitation. Kahlo's work does not shy away from the brutality of her experiences but instead confronts it head-on, refusing to allow her disability to silence her artistic voice. Her art becomes a form of resistance, giving voice to the silenced experiences of women with disabilities.

4. Rebirth and Resilience

Despite the profound challenges faced by women with disabilities, many demonstrate remarkable resilience, transforming their pain into power and reclaiming their agency in the face of oppression. Taddei (2020) draws on the metaphor of the phoenix—a symbol of rebirth and transformation—to describe how disabled women can rise from the ashes of their marginalization and oppression. This resilience is not just about survival; it is about actively resisting the structures that seek to disempower them and forging new identities that embrace both their gender and disability as sources of strength.

In the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*, the Beast's transformation into a prince symbolizes the potential for

change and recognition that lies within those who are initially marginalized or misunderstood. For women with disabilities, this transformation often involves reclaiming their narratives and identities from societal structures that have long sought to define them as passive or powerless. Ulivieri (2020) argues that educational systems must foster a culture of dialogue and encounter, where differences are not seen as deficits but as valuable aspects of human diversity. This pedagogical shift is essential for creating a society that values and supports the resilience of disabled women.

Corsi et al. (2016) highlight the importance of emotional education in fostering resilience among survivors of violence, emphasizing that resilience is not an inherent trait but something that can be cultivated through supportive relationships and community resources. This idea resonates with the experiences of many women with disabilities, who, despite facing systemic barriers, find ways to rebuild their lives and assert their autonomy. The concept of resilience is vividly illustrated in Frida Kahlo's life and work. Despite enduring immense physical pain and emotional turmoil, Kahlo continued to create art that not only reflected her suffering but also her unyielding spirit. Her self-portraits, often depicting her broken body, are powerful affirmations of survival and self-empowerment.

In education and social policy, the stories of women with disabilities serve as critical reminders of the need for inclusive frameworks that recognize and support their resilience. As Ulivieri (2022) notes, the struggle for gender equality cannot be separated from the struggle for disability rights. By embracing a pedagogy of difference, society can create spaces where the voices and experiences of disabled women are not only heard but valued, contributing to a broader understanding of human dignity and worth.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of double discrimination faced by women with disabilities illustrates the intricate ways in which ableism and sexism intersect to compound vulnerability and marginalization. However, these intersections also serve as critical sites for resistance and resilience. Disabled women, through their experiences of surviving violence, not only resist their erasure but also actively contribute to reshaping societal norms that have historically oppressed them. As Taddei (2020) suggests, these women rise like phoenixes from the ashes of their marginalization, reclaiming their autonomy and challenging the systems that seek to define them solely by their vulnerabilities.

The educational value of these stories cannot be overstated. By integrating the narratives of women with disabilities into feminist and educational discourse, we broaden our understanding of both gender-based violence and ableism. Belser (2020) argues that disabled women, like all marginalized groups, are often rendered invisible in discussions of broader societal issues such as climate change and environmental violence. Yet, their experiences offer critical perspectives on resilience and hope, particularly in how they navigate and survive hostile environments. Similarly, Pons et al. (2022) emphasize the human rights implications of violence against disabled women, underscoring the need for international legal frameworks that recognize these violations as crimes against humanity.

To move forward, society must adopt a more intersectional and inclusive approach to addressing violence and discrimination. Ulivieri (2023) calls for a pedagogy that embraces difference rather than seeking to erase or diminish it. By educating future generations about the unique struggles and strengths of disabled women, we can create more supportive, equitable, and just environments.

Moreover, the fight for gender equality cannot be separated from the fight for disability rights. As Wiseman and Watson (2022) note, disabled women continue to face significant barriers to achieving justice and recognition in both legal and social contexts. The stories of these women, however, remind us that even in the face of profound discrimination and violence, resilience and rebirth are possible. Their narratives challenge societal norms and call for systemic change that values and uplifts all individuals, regardless of their gender or ability.

Through education, policy reform, and continued advocacy, we can work toward a society where women with disabilities are no longer doubly violated but instead celebrated for their resilience and contributions. In doing so, we create a more inclusive world where the voices of all women are heard, respected, and valued.

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