

**Preventing abuse and providing access to justice for individuals with  
complex communication needs: The role of AAC**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Individuals with disability, in particular those with complex communication needs, have an increased risk of falling victim to crimes such as abuse and violence. The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) highlights the human rights that all persons should enjoy. It recognises the importance of communication, not only as a basic human right that is essential to ensure one's protection and one's participation in all spheres of life, but also as an essential human need through which opinions, thoughts, emotions and points of view can be shared. This paper will address four specific articles of the CRPD that are essential for preventing abuse (including sexual abuse) and for providing access to justice for these at-risk individuals. These are: Article 6 (Women with Disabilities); Article 16 (Freedom from Exploitation, Violence and Abuse); Article 12 (Equal Recognition Before the Law) and Article 13 (Access to Justice). Seven South African studies that focused on these four articles will be described in terms of their aims, methods, results and clinical implications.

## **KEYWORDS**

Abuse; disability; human rights; justice; sexuality; violence

## **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

After reading this paper, the learner should be able to

- i) explain why individuals with complex communication needs are at higher risk for abuse than their non-disabled peers;
- (ii) discuss specific strategies that could be used to prevent abuse of individuals with complex communication needs;
- (iii) summarize strategies that contain proven evidence for allowing persons with complex communication needs access to justice.

## CEU QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS (correct answers are bolded)

1. Violence against persons with disability tend to:
  - a. Be more severe, not once-off, have a longer duration, and usually take on the same form.
  - b. Be more severe, not once-off, have a longer duration, and usually take on different forms.**
  - c. Be less severe, not once-off, have a longer duration, and usually take on the same form.
  - d. Be more severe, not once-off, have a short, intense duration, and usually take on the same form.
  - e. Be more severe, once-off, have a short intense duration, and usually take on different forms.
  
2. A social story should adhere to the following principles to make it effective for a sexuality training program for individuals with intellectual disabilities:
  - a. Focus more on the use of pictures, and omit pre-written text.
  - b. Describe at length the social behavior that is often governed by various unwritten and unspoken rules, so as not to omit any detail.
  - c. Include long detailed descriptions of a particular activity as well as the anticipated behavior associated with it, in order to demystify unknown concepts.
  - d. Describe the particular activity in a custom-written format, but do not be prescriptive about the anticipated behavior.
  - e. Be short and custom-written to describe a particular activity as well as the anticipated behavior associated with it.**

3. A disability sensitivity training program for police officers should contain the following elements:
  - a. A detailed description of the different types of disability to promote greater recognition and acceptance of the specific condition.
  - b. A focus on knowledge and skills training related to disability, as attitudes take longer to change and require multiple training opportunities.
  - c. The use of collaborative teaching approaches from multi-disciplinary professionals and coverage of the disability spectrum in a broad manner without focusing on the characteristics of specific types of disability.**
  - d. The training should be conducted by fellow police officers, as they understand the specific needs of the police environment, making the training focused and applicable.
  - e. The use of a problem-based approach that focuses on content related to policing practice and the exclusion of role-play activities as they are not relevant when training police officers.
4. Persons with complex communication needs are often not given the opportunity to testify in court because of the following misperceptions:
  - a. It is assumed that even although they can make choices, their poor expressive language skills also imply poor receptive language skills.
  - b. It is assumed that they cannot make choices and that both their receptive and expressive language skills are affected.**
  - c. It is assumed that their receptive language is good and that they are able to tell about their victimization, but that their expressive language skills prohibit them from testifying.

- d. It is assumed that although they are able to make choices, they cannot indicate their intent, and therefore they should not be expected to testify.
  - e. All persons with complex communication needs are like children, and they will be believed in court as they lack the capacity to lie.
5. Social validation of communication boards in AAC is done to:
- a. Make stakeholders (e.g. persons with complex communication needs) feel important, although their input does not really change the outcome (communication board).
  - b. Improve the effectiveness and relevance of communication boards, although it is time consuming to include stakeholders, and therefore not a recommended practice.
  - c. Increase stakeholder representation.
  - d. Create employment opportunities for persons with complex communication needs as stakeholders.
  - e. **Increase stakeholder accountability and improve the effectiveness and relevance of communication boards.**

## **DISCLOSURES**

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Understanding abuse and violence against persons with severe communication disability is reminiscent of peeling the proverbial “onion”. Unfortunately, in this case the onion is ugly, and one is confronted with a situation where every layer that is peeled off reveals an increasingly ugly scene – the situation simply becomes more and more hideous. In fact, a US-based study estimates that individuals with developmental disabilities are four to ten times more likely to be victims of a crime, and moreover, these crimes are less likely to be reported or prosecuted<sup>1</sup>. Evidence also suggests that women with disabilities are at greater risk than their non-disabled peers, as they are a group with multiple minority status factors such as gender bias, poverty, inaccessibility to and reliance on support services, stigmatization and isolation<sup>2,3,4</sup>. The shocking fact is that it has been estimated that more than 70% of women with a wide variety of disabilities are prone to be violently assaulted at some point in their lives<sup>5</sup>.

The nature of abuse against persons with disability also differs from abuse perpetrated against peers without disability. Reports show that the violence tends to be more severe, to consist of multiple or different forms, to not be once-off events and also to have a longer duration<sup>6</sup>. Research has also shown that the effect of trauma is more severe if the abuse continues over a period of time<sup>7</sup>. Psychologically, persons with disability may experience depression, develop feelings of shame and guilt, lose trust and display irrational fears that can lead to socially withdrawn, self-injurious, non-compliant and promiscuous sexual behaviour<sup>3</sup>.

## **UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (CRPD)**

The Convention of the Rights for Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was developed by the United Nations<sup>8</sup> to respect, promote and protect the human rights and dignity of all persons with disabilities, including those individuals who require more intensive support,

such as individuals who need or who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC). It recognizes disability as an evolving concept and alludes to the fact that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. The CRPD also highlights that women and girls with disabilities are often at greater risk than their male counterparts for violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, and maltreatment or exploitation, both within and outside the home<sup>3,4</sup>.

The CRPD comprises 33 core articles that cover all areas of life<sup>8</sup>. Two articles are of specific significance as they relate to preventing abuse against women with disability – Article 6 (Women with Disabilities) and Article 16 (Freedom from Exploitation, Violence and Abuse). Two further articles are concerned with providing access to justice – Article 12 (Equal Recognition Before the Law) and Article 13 (Access to Justice). A series of seven different studies have been conducted in South Africa to address these four articles, and they will next be described in more detail. Each study includes a brief introduction, followed by the aim of the study and the research methodology used. Finally, the results are summarized and clinical implications provided. Figure 1 provides a conceptual map for this paper.

In September 2015, Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which has 17 specific goals aimed at promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels<sup>9</sup>. It is expected that the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will influence the direction of global and national policies relating to sustainable development for the next 15 years.



**Figure 1:** Seven studies related to four articles of the CRPD (UN, 2006) set within Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2016).

Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) is of particular relevance to this paper as it aims to reduce all forms of violence (including sexual violence committed against all persons – also individuals with disability) and works with governments and communities to find lasting solutions<sup>9</sup>. Strengthening the rule of law and promoting human rights is central to this process. Goal 16 of the SDG thus encompasses the four specific articles of the CRPD.



## **Article 6: Women with Disabilities**

Article 6 of the CRPD<sup>8</sup> states that governments should recognize that women and girls with disabilities are subject to multiple discrimination, and that additional measures should be taken to ensure their full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It also instructs that measures be put in place to ensure the full development, advancement and empowerment of women.

The sexuality of women with disability is often misunderstood. Sometimes they are regarded as sexually innocent with little or no understanding of their bodies, which makes them prime targets for perpetrators who base abuse on sexuality<sup>10</sup>. Others mistakenly think that women with disability have a heightened, uncontrolled sex-drive, based on the fact that they are sometimes overly friendly with both familiar and unfamiliar people and the fact that they might show inappropriate sexual behaviors, such as masturbation in public<sup>11</sup>. A South African study showed that if women with disability who live in poverty were to appear in public with torn clothes or without underwear due to poor personal care at home, potential perpetrators might be led to believe that these women want sex<sup>12</sup>. Perpetrators often stated that the sexual abuse of women with disability should be interpreted as “a blessing”, in that the woman with the disability should “count herself lucky” to have sexual intercourse<sup>13</sup>.

These grievous misconceptions about sexuality have led to the first of the seven studies, and initiated the development of a sexuality and relationship training program for women with intellectual disabilities, using a social story approach<sup>14</sup>. Sexuality education is often un-acknowledged and therefore not taught in a proactive manner, which results in women with disability lacking the necessary skills to make well-informed decisions regarding sexuality<sup>3</sup>. **Study 1** adopted a multi-method study design involving three different phases to develop four social stories that could be used as part of a sexuality and relationship training program for women with intellectual disabilities<sup>14</sup>. Phase 1 entailed a systematic search of the

available literature on the use of social stories as an intervention tool to modify or decrease inappropriate social behavior related to sexuality and relationships in individuals with disability. Social stories attempt to demystify complex social behavior, which is often governed by various unwritten and unspoken rules (the so-called “hidden curriculum”). For example, in a greeting situation, arms folded across the chest means *I don't want a hug*<sup>15</sup>. These rules are typically short and custom-written to describe a particular activity (for example, hugging) as well as the anticipated behavior associated with it (for example who to hug, how to hug, and when to hug)<sup>16</sup>. Results from the systematic review indicated that social stories provide a suitable methodology for teaching socially desirable responses related to sexuality and relationships.

The main aim of Phase 2 was to provide women with intellectual disability the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience about sexuality and relationships, and to make their voices heard. A focus group discussion with 10 women with intellectual disabilities was held and four specific questions were presented to them in an understandable format. The fact that the women with disabilities themselves were involved, rather than proxy participants such as caregivers or parents, was one of the strengths of Study 1 and it served as an empowerment strategy<sup>17</sup>. Four themes were extrapolated from the data: i) Clarifying the difference between a romantic relationship and other types of relationships; ii) Clarifying how to behave in a romantic relationship by differentiating between the male and female roles; iii) Clarifying how to behave in relationships that are not romantic, for example different types of greetings; iv) Clarifying what type of behavior and conversations are appropriate for different types of relationships.

Next, in Phase 3, four social stories that were written based on the results of these two phases were implemented with 10 caregivers of women with intellectual disabilities in order to evaluate the appropriateness of the stories<sup>18</sup>. Results showed that three of the four social

stories were appropriate (*All about Hugs; Happy and Unhappy Secrets; Different Types of Relationships*). However, one (*Romantic Relationships*) required re-writing as it was not appropriate for the specific context, because women at the facility involved did not have the opportunity to go on dates. A suggestion was made that the story be re-written to reflect romantic relationships as opposed to dating. Nonetheless, the main clinical implication of Study 1 is that social stories can be used successfully to explain complex constructs related to disability in an easy, understandable manner and make it applicable to women with intellectual disability. Sexuality education on an on-going basis and the promotion of positive attitudes toward appropriate sexual behavior are critical in the fight against violence and abuse of these women<sup>14</sup>.

### **Article 16: Freedom from Exploitation, Violence and Abuse**

Two specific studies relate to Article 16. The first of these studies (Study 2) focused on reducing the risk of being a victim of crime in South Africa through disclosure, and in this study the *You can Tell and be Heard* Communication board was developed<sup>19</sup>. This was followed by Study 3, which focused on the social validation of this communication board<sup>20</sup>.

As stated earlier, women with complex communication needs have a heightened risk of becoming victims of crime, abuse, and neglect. **Study 2** aimed to develop a vocabulary list and subsequent communication board in four of South Africa's 11 official languages (Afrikaans, English, Sepedi and isiZulu)<sup>19</sup> to be used by illiterate individuals to disclose abuse. A workshop on abuse was presented to raise awareness around the heightened vulnerability of women with disability. Thirty-six participants (teachers, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, a psychologist, a counselor, a criminologist, a criminal lawyer, a disability activist and a young adult who uses AAC) were recruited and four language-based focus groups were conducted in which participants were asked to generate a

list of possible words they deemed important when wanting to disclose a crime, abuse or neglect. They were asked to not include words that referred to specific body parts, as it was decided that a picture of a human body (front-facing and back-facing) would be provided on the back of the communication board along with an alphabet<sup>21</sup>. Following a brainstorming session during which they were asked to list useful words, they were then asked to prioritize the top 55 words.

Words that appeared on two or more boards were considered for inclusion on the final board, with 56 words appearing on two or more of the lists for the four language groups. Only five words appeared on all four lists, namely *hit*, *man*, *sore*, *sad* and *woman*. The board was developed using Picture Communication Symbols (PCS), which had been identified in an electronic mail survey as the most frequently used symbol set in South Africa. A discrepancy analysis revealed that these 56 words could be represented by 219 symbols. The word for which the largest number of PCS symbols existed, was the word “I” (16 symbols). A decision was taken to select the most generic symbol that would not typically depict gender or race for the board to reflect South Africa’s multilingual, multicultural context. Symbols had to be developed for two words (*swear* and *threaten*) as no PCS symbols existed for them at the time<sup>19</sup>.

Using communication boards with pre-determined vocabulary (such as the *You can Tell and be Heard* communication board) continues to be of concern. Social validation of vocabulary has been suggested as one way to improve the effectiveness and relevance of communication boards. However, despite increased emphasis on stakeholder accountability, which is ensured through social validation<sup>22</sup>, communication boards are not frequently used in AAC research. The aim of Study 3<sup>20</sup> was to investigate the social validity of a vocabulary set identified in Study 2<sup>19</sup>, in which stakeholder focus groups were used to identify

vocabulary that could be used by South African adults who use AAC to disclose their experiences as victims of crime or abuse.

Twelve literate South African adults with complex communication needs who used alphabet-based AAC systems used a five-point Likert scale to score the importance of each of the previously identified 57 vocabulary items. The Likert scale ranged from 1 = “not at all important to include” to 5 = “very important” to include. Items were presented alphabetically. Results show that, overall, 80% of the words were deemed to be either “very important to include” or “quite important to include”, although there was not 100% agreement on any of the words. Two words (*forced* and *help*) were considered important by 93% of the participants, while another two words (*car* and *get*) were considered as not important by 50% of the participants.

Participants suggested no additional words in the open-ended questionnaire that asked if they could think of any additional words to add. Study 3<sup>20</sup> illustrates that the rigorous two-step process of first using stakeholder focus groups to identify vocabulary (as was done in Study 2<sup>19</sup>), and then having literate persons who use AAC provide information on the social validity of the vocabulary on behalf of their peers who are illiterate (as was done in Study 3<sup>20</sup>), appears to hold promise as a culturally relevant vocabulary selection approach for sensitive topics such as crime and abuse.

### **Article 12: Equal Recognition Before the Law**

Two studies focused specifically on Article 12. These were Study 4, which focused on identifying barriers in the South African criminal justice system and the implications thereof for individuals with little or no functional speech<sup>23</sup>, and Study 5, which focused on identifying facilitators that enabled persons with severe communication disabilities to access the criminal justice system<sup>24</sup>.

Persons with complex communication needs who are victims of crime encounter many barriers in accessing the criminal justice system. The aim of Study 4<sup>23</sup> was to determine the barriers experienced in the South African criminal justice system as perceived by experts in the field, as a first step to address the equality of persons with disability before the law. A qualitative research design, with 56 expert professionals in the criminal justice system divided into two different sequential data sources, was employed.

The first data source included in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=3) with a medical social worker, a forensic nurse and a forensic childcare specialist. Results from this data source informed the second data source which was in the form of four focus groups (n=53), and included social workers, lawyers, speech-language pathologists, teachers, child and youth workers, forensic nurses, probation officers and disability advocates. Barriers were divided into opportunity barriers (barriers imposed by others and which are beyond the control of the person with disability) and access barriers (barriers within the individuals with disability themselves, such as their own attitudes, capabilities and limitations<sup>25</sup>).

Results indicated numerous opportunity and access barriers, but the main reported barrier was the fact that the majority of legal professionals had little or no knowledge and training with respect to individuals with disability who had been victims of crime and who needed access to the criminal justice system<sup>23</sup>. Other barriers that were noted were attitudes towards persons with disability who may or may not have complex communication needs, a lack of resources (e.g. no communication boards in court and a lack of interpreters and intermediaries) and policy barriers (e.g. the competency test which is an evaluation of a defendant's ability to understand and rationally participate in the court process). These findings are similar to the data reported in other international studies<sup>26, 27,28,29,30</sup>. The findings suggested that more support and resources had to be provided to individuals with complex communication needs. Furthermore, disability training should become the top priority for all

professionals who work in the criminal justice system. Recommendations were also made to develop an augmentative and alternative communication resource toolkit that may be used in the criminal justice system to assist these professionals in obtaining social justice for individuals with complex communication needs who had been victims of crime<sup>23</sup>.

Study 5<sup>24</sup> attempted to identify the factors that could facilitate and assist persons with severe communication disabilities who had been victims of crime to be able to fairly and rightly access the criminal justice system. A qualitative research methodology was adopted in which semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with expert witnesses (n=3) and three focus groups were conducted in three provinces in South Africa (Gauteng focus group, n=6; Western Cape focus group, n=8; and KwaZulu-Natal focus group, n=8). All of these participants had experience with persons with disabilities who had been victims of crime. Results from the three focus group discussions and in-depth interviews were combined, and conventional qualitative analysis was used to identify themes related to the question: *What may facilitate the process of an illiterate individual who cannot speak to access the criminal justice system, e.g. to testify in court?*

Results were subsequently linked to the contextual factors (personal and environmental factors) listed in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), proposed by the World Health Organization<sup>31</sup>. Regarding personal factors, *Coping* was identified as the main theme, with feeling supported and feeling at ease as sub-themes. Regarding environmental factors, five themes that are directly related to ICF codes<sup>31</sup> were identified, namely:

- *Products and Technology*, with the sub-themes of needing an assistive communication kit and needing low-technology communication aids.
- *Natural Environmental and Human-made Changes to the Environment*, with five sub-themes: considering alternative court context (e.g. a private room); prioritizing cases that

involve persons with disability; allowing appropriate questioning strategies; accepting different communication modes; and adapting the physical court environment to accommodate, for example, wheelchairs.

- *Support and Relationships* with the following sub-themes: providing comprehensive support (for example, not only to the individual with disability but also to the family in cases where the family members are not suspected of being perpetrators); ensuring that the person with disability feels supported and at ease; and allowing both a sign language interpreter and an intermediary, as they fulfill different roles.
- *Attitudes*, which had three sub-themes, namely dispelling myths about sexuality and disability, addressing stigma around cognitive disability and changing these negative attitudes through training.
- *Services, Systems and Policies* which was addressed by the following sub-themes: training across different levels in the criminal justice system about disability to ensure effective service delivery; preparing persons with disability both before and after their court appearances; employing an intermediary for all persons who have disability, ensuring greater collaboration of all role players in the criminal justice system, and finally reforming legislation with strategic litigation.

This research highlighted that both environmental factors and personal factors should be addressed to ensure access to the criminal justice system for this vulnerable population<sup>24</sup>. This is in line with other authors<sup>32</sup> who highlighted the importance of court preparation in order to make victims feel safe and comfortable when testifying. This research underscored the clinical finding that despite the vulnerability of persons with complex communication needs falling victim to crime and their challenges in accessing the criminal justice system, a number of facilitators exist that can effectively be used to ensure access to justice for these individuals. It was further suggested that an AAC and Disability Resource Toolkit be



developed which can be used as a guideline and best practice model to ensure equal access to the criminal justice system for persons with complex communication needs.

### **Article 13: Access to Justice**

Two studies were conducted that focused on access to justice. Study 6 focused on police officer disability sensitivity training<sup>33</sup> and Study 7 on testifying in court as a crime victim for persons with complex communication needs, with a specific focus on their vocabulary needs<sup>34</sup>.

Given the fact that the global disability prevalence rate is estimated at about 15%<sup>35</sup> and that persons with disability are more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system than members of the general public due to a variety of reasons,<sup>36,37</sup> it makes sense that police officers should be sensitized, educated and trained to understand and recognize the features of disability and that they should be equipped to handle these challenges as they arise. Study 6<sup>33</sup> shows a systematic review of disability sensitivity training programs provided to police officers. Thirteen databases were searched between 1980 and 2015, and initially 10,795 records were identified. After excluding the papers that did not meet the eligibility criteria (not focused specifically on police officers or law enforcement officers; training programs not focused on disability aspects such as autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disability, sensory disability, physical disability, learning disability and communication disability, but that focused on suicide, drugs, human trafficking, mental illness, mood disorders and conduct disorder), a total of 321 records remained.

These records were screened and evaluated according to the inclusion criteria, resulting in 19 records that were read in full text. Of these, 16 did not meet the specific criteria set for the systematic review. The results from Study 6<sup>33</sup> showed that only a few primary research studies report on and evaluate disability sensitivity training programs for

police officers. The program content and outcomes of the three included studies focused on three types of disability, namely intellectual disability<sup>38</sup>, learning disability<sup>39</sup> and hearing disability<sup>40</sup>. All three of these studies reported statistically significant changes in attitudes post-training in comparison to control groups. The findings also showed that when police officers are trained, collaborative teaching approaches that involve multi-disciplinary professionals (for example social workers, psychologists, police officers and persons with disability themselves) are preferable<sup>41</sup>.

Furthermore, a problem-based and experiential learning approach that combines information-gathering activities and group discussions with role-play, simulations, videos and direct contact with persons with disabilities themselves, may promote longer-lasting training effects<sup>33</sup>. It was found that the content of such a program should cover the disability spectrum to promote greater recognition and acceptance, while simultaneously highlighting specific unique factors of sub-groups. Based on this systematic review, it was also recommended that training programs should go beyond attitudes alone, and include aspects of knowledge and skills related to responding effectively and empathetically to persons with a variety of disability profiles<sup>33</sup>.

The final study in this collection, Study 7<sup>34</sup>, deals with the vocabulary implications when persons with complex communication needs testify in court as victims of crime. This study stemmed from a number of common misconceptions about persons with complex communication needs, such as mistakenly assuming that poor expressive language skills also imply poor receptive language skills<sup>11</sup>; falsely believing that persons with complex communication needs are unable to make choices<sup>12</sup>; that they cannot indicate their intent<sup>42</sup>; that they are unable to tell about their victimization<sup>43</sup>; and that they will not be believed when they do disclose because they might not be understood<sup>43</sup>.

The aim of Study 7<sup>34</sup> was to identify, describe and socially validate the core and legal fringe vocabulary that illiterate victims of crime who have complex communication needs would require to testify in court. A mixed-method exploratory sequential design consisting of two different phases was used to address this aim. The first phase was qualitative and used two different data sources, namely three in-depth semi-structured interviews with experts, as well as three focus group discussions (n=22). The aim of Phase 1 was to identify and describe the core and fringe legal vocabulary by compiling a vocabulary list. This resulted in legal core vocabulary that could be presented in six distinct vocabulary categories (when, who, what, how, where and emotions/feelings), as well as a list of 99 words that represented the legal fringe vocabulary<sup>44</sup>. Phase 2 (the quantitative phase) built on Phase 1, and professionals from the legal justice system (inter alia social workers and lawyers (n=31)) socially validated the vocabulary list developed in Phase 1.

The 99 words that remained in the *important* and *very important* categories following the social validation phase were spread across different word classes, namely verbs (39 words), nouns (29 words), descriptors (14 words), prepositions (9 words), as well as nine “other words”. As is clear from these results, it will be important to ensure that all verb classes are included, and to pay specific attention to verbs<sup>44</sup> so as to allow for a successful testimony. Study 7<sup>34</sup> also highlighted that the linguistic implications of the word classes be considered on communication boards, for example, verbs should always be in the present tense (*scream*) rather than in the past tense (*screamed*), continuous tense (*screaming*) or future tense (*will scream*). Furthermore, when questioning persons with disability, the questions should always be phrased in the active form (*Who hit you?*) rather than in the passive form (*By whom were you hit?*)<sup>45</sup>.

The vocabulary identified in Study 7<sup>34</sup> could assist individuals with complex communication needs to testify in court and to rightly gain access to the criminal justice

system, in line with Article 13 of the CRPD<sup>8</sup>. However, this study also showed that although this vocabulary list could be used as the basis for a communication board, all communication boards should be individualized to focus on the individual as well as on the specific crime, in order to optimize their functionality.

## **CONCLUSION**

Preventing abuse against persons with complex communication needs and providing them with access to justice is indeed an intense and often painful exercise. This process of delving deeper into the heart of the “onion” – in this case an “ugly onion” – and exposing the layers carefully and slowly, one by one, may well bring tears to the eye, as would the actual vegetable. Abuse of persons with disabilities constitutes a crime that cannot be tolerated in a civilized world.

It is for this exact reason that service providers who interact with these individuals should be equipped to deal with these crimes. Multi-faceted challenges require a multi-faceted solution. International treaties such as the CRPD (UN, 2006) and global targets such as the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2016) – officially known as *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* – provide a conceptual framework for understanding the specific components as highlighted in this paper. The series of seven studies discussed in this paper all attempted to address specific components, from understanding the sexuality of women with intellectual disabilities and the importance of sexuality education for persons with disability, to providing communication boards that allow the opportunity to disclose victimization. Meeting this challenge also goes beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries and involves a variety of role players: persons with disabilities themselves, as well as their families, speech-language pathologists, police and other law enforcement officers, lawyers, intermediaries, interpreters and judges, to name but a few.

Throughout this paper, the importance was emphasized of moving beyond the simple transfer of knowledge-based information related to the topic, to the provision of skills-based training and the bringing about of attitudinal changes.

There is still so much to learn in this field. But as one starts to painstakingly peel away the layers of this onion, one begins to understand what should be done to reclaim the dignity of persons with a disability who have become the victims of crime.

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