**Lucia Bellini’s transcript**

**Introduction: Eleanor**

… Lucia, Lucia Bellini who is also with me in Sisters of Frida. She is a Steering Group Member. Lucia currently works as an advocate for disabled people who are victims of domestic violence; she is also a disability rights advocate where she assists people to asses care packages, to be re-housed, to apply for benefits, to appeal against decisions that they are not happy with and I’m going to let Lucia talk about her role.

**Lucia**

Thank you very much and it’s really good to see people here considering it is one of the last sessions of the event. Yes, as Eleanor has explained, my name is Lucia Bellini and I am a Disability and Domestic Violence Advocate at a small charity in East London called Stay Safe East and we work specifically with disabled people who have been survivors of domestic violence, hate crime, sexual violence and any other forms of Human Rights abuses. And I specifically work with, well mostly, disabled women to support them to make choices and access services and also to provide them with emotional support as well as advocacy. So we’ve been talking about empowerment and what it means to be empowered and I think one of the issues, to start with, is that when it comes to diversity we’re very – we’re moving forward as a society to celebrate different forms of diversity - but when we think about disability and disabled people, disability itself is still seen as a problem, as a defect, as a lack of something, as somebody who has limitations. So when you are growing up with that way of thinking and hearing people refer to you as somebody who has limitations or somebody who isn’t maybe going to achieve the same as her non-disabled peers, you are automatically going to have a negative view of yourself. For a lot of disabled women in particular they’re sent to institutions or segregated education where they’re not taught about things like sex education, they’re not taught about violence or abuse, or what it means to be abused, or what it means to be controlled. A lot of women for example who have learning difficulties, or in some countries they call them intellectual disabilities, they don’t necessarily understand what abuse is and it’s not because they can’t but it’s because they’re not taught in a way which is accessible to them. Many women, disabled women, are not seen as being sexual beings so the chance of us getting into a relationship is non-existent and therefore the chances of us experiencing violence, including sexual violence, is also non-existent. And that is the attitude that many people have. Obviously in many countries a lot of disabled women don’t even get any education, don’t have any education, at all so again the way they see themselves is going to be very negative. Therefore it’s very possible that for a lot of disabled women they get into relationships where they feel “This is my only opportunity of having a relationship because I’ve been told I never will, and I’ve been told I’ll never be normal.” and so they have a relationship and then when there is abuse in that relationship, they may either not know that it’s abuse, or they may feel that this will be the only opportunity they have of having a relationship so they can’t get out of it. A lot of disabled women may depend on the perpetrator for personal care, very intimate care. They may also depend on the perpetrator to assist with things like medication, or attending appointments or a lot of women with, maybe, learning difficulties or mental health, it might be that the perpetrator provides them with forms of emotional support, encouragement to attend appointments, to go out, to take part in social activities. So it’s a form of dependence that’s very difficult to get out of because when they want to leave a situation it can be terrifying. The thought of being without that person who is also their carer, in many ways, is very scary, especially when you’ve been in that relationship for years. Now, domestic violence, domestic abuse can be very similar or the same – we can have the same experiences as non-disabled women but in some ways our experiences can also be different. So for example I’ve had clients who are living with family members who take away their equipment: so if they’re physically disabled they’ll have their walking frame taken away or special equipment that they use in the house has been moved so they have to stand up for long periods of time, which can be very physically very painful. So that isn’t a conventional form of physical violence but it is physical violence because that person is being forced to stand up and therefore they’re being forced to be in pain, to experience physical pain because their equipment isn’t accessible to them. Many people could have either their medication taken away, or they could over-medicated: so I’ve had a client who’s had, who has, mental health issues whose partner, who’s a perpetrator, has convinced her to take extra medication because he said it would be really beneficial for her mental health and to assist with her levels of high anxiety and when she took the extra medication he then took advantage and raped her - and this happened many times over the course of months. These are not - still not - recognised in the same way as other forms of physical abuse against a non-disabled woman is. Many disabled women could experience abuse from a paid personal assistant or, as some people would call, a carer. This could be just as frightening but unfortunately this is not seen as domestic violence, so therefore the woman may not get the same access to services as a non-disabled woman who has experienced violence from her partner. There are - I know I haven’t got that long left so I’ll try and wrap up very quickly and we hopefully can come back to the discussion at the end - but there are difficulties for disabled women that are, particularly when thinking of leaving a situation, for example many refuges or safe houses are not accessible. I think in the whole of London there are something like eight refuges that are accessible to women in wheelchairs and they each have only about one or two accessible rooms and I’m sure that there are many more women than eight wanting to flee domestic violence who use wheelchairs or who need an accessible room. Accessing the police and the justice system for many women, specifically with learning difficulties or with mental health, they may not be believed by the police and many women may not know how to get the support and would need assistance from somebody to explain the processes to them. I work with a lot of disabled mothers who are living in a situation where they’re experiencing domestic violence but they know that without the perpetrator they’ve been told by social services that they can’t look after their children. So I’ve had one client in particular who’s recently had two children taken away but she’s too scared to leave her partner, who is abusive and, because she’s too scared to leave her partner, social services are threatening to take away the other three. So those are just some of the barriers that are experienced by disabled women and it would be interesting to hear from people here if they’ve got any barriers or issues that they’ve come across in different parts of the world, in different countries. Thank you very much.