

RESEARCH ARTICLE

(Un)safe spaces: experiences of sexual violence at associations for people with dwarfism

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Associations for people with dwarfism exist across the world and provide their members with invaluable support. Their annual conventions provide the opportunity for their members to meet other people with dwarfism, while engaging in leisure and social activities free from social abuse. This also includes typical dating opportunities which, outside of these spaces, are impacted by stereotypes of disability and sexuality. While conventions supposedly offer people with dwarfism a safe space, when considering intersecting identities, in this case gender and dwarfism, this article demonstrates how they become unsafe spaces for women with dwarfism. Drawing on survey data, this article focuses on incidents of sexual violence experienced by women with dwarfism when attending conventions. The aim of this article is not to shame associations but to expose unethical behaviours and offer recommendations as to how they can reduce the risk of sexual violence occurring, and therefore make their conventions safer for women with dwarfism to attend.

Keywords dwarfism • sexual violence • safe spaces • unsafe spaces • associations for people with dwarfism • conventions

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Introduction

Conventions for people with dwarfism are an example of a safe space. A safe space is deemed an inclusive space, which permits a group to express their identity freely and comfortably, in other words to be their authentic self (Hartal, 2017). This allows people with dwarfism to behave and interact with others, in ways that are not impacted by ableism. For example, unlike public spaces, conventions enable people with dwarfism to take in activities without fear of mockery from others, such as name calling (Pritchard, 2021a). Conventions held by associations for people with

dwarfism were set up as spaces where they could meet up and share information and support specifically in relation to dwarfism (Ablon, 1981; Kruse, 2002). The majority were created by people with dwarfism situating them as a space specifically for their needs. The longest-running association is Little People of America (LPA), which was set up in 1957 by the late actor Billy Barty (1924–2000). There exist numerous other associations for people with dwarfism around the world, including, but not limited to: The Danish Dwarf Association, Little People of Canada, Little People of Ireland, Little People of New Zealand and Short Statured People of Australia (SSPA). LPA is by far the largest association for people with dwarfism, with over 8000 members (Little People of America, 2020). Not only does their annual convention attract people with dwarfism and their families from across the US, but also from numerous other countries, including the UK, Canada and Ireland. In the UK, there are several associations that support people with dwarfism, including the Dwarf Sports Association UK (DSAUK), Little People UK (LPUK), the Restricted Growth Association (RGA), and Short Statured Scotland (SSS). In most cases, associations hold an annual convention, in their home country, that can be a weekend to one week long. Due to the nature of conventions, which are not permanently situated but are usually held in hotels across their respective countries, they can be considered ‘temporal safe spaces’.

Conventions for people with dwarfism can be considered safe spaces as they permit people with dwarfism to express themselves and interact with others free from ableism. People with dwarfism have reported feeling unsafe in everyday public spaces (Shakespeare et al, 2010), due to the social abuse they receive from other members of society (Pritchard, 2021a); in particular within spaces associated with the night-time economy, as people are more likely to be inebriated and thus more likely to engage in social abuse, including mockery towards them (Pritchard, 2021a). This can impact the opportunity to socialize, including looking for an intimate partner. For people with dwarfism, the formation of their own associations has aided in providing them with their own safe spaces. In particular, attending conventions enables them to avoid these unwanted situations and instead partake in social and leisure activities in the same way as most average-sized people, including dating activities.

While conventions are predominantly considered safe spaces, this article demonstrates that intersectional identities, in this case gender and dwarfism, can disrupt the notion of these spaces as safe. Both men and women with dwarfism may use conventions to find a partner, however, how they go about it can differ and thus impact their experiences of these spaces. Women with dwarfism are likely to experience multiple forms of discrimination due to their intersecting identities (Valentine, 2007). This article examines experiences of sexual violence at conventions held by associations for people with dwarfism. Sexual violence encompasses many different types of behaviours, including completed or ‘attempted non-consensual intercourse, other abusive sexual contact, and noncontact sexual abuse, such as verbal sexual harassment’ (Alriksson-Schmidt et al, 2010). This article argues that the supposedly safe-space nature of conventions of association for people with dwarfism, coupled with stereotypes of disabled people’s sexuality, has made sexual violence experienced by people with dwarfism an ignored topic within these spaces. The aim is not to shame associations but to expose unethical behaviours and offer recommendations as to how they can reduce the risk of sexual violence occurring, and therefore make their conventions safer for all people with dwarfism to attend.

Dwarfism, sexuality and space

The silencing of sexual violence has been going on for decades (Hershcovis et al, 2021). Due to high rates of sexual assault yet low response rates, it has been referred to as a 'silent epidemic' (Abbey et al, 2001). Furthermore, despite its success in raising awareness about sexual violence, disabled survivors of sexual violence have been ignored within the #MeToo movement (Buckley, 2020; Maule, 2020; Gieseler, 2022). Gieseler (2022) points out that media reporting of the #MeToo movement posits the ideal survivor, which is a white, able-bodied woman. However, disabled people are more likely to be survivors of sexual violence than their non-disabled counterparts (Andrews and Veronen, 2013; Basile et al, 2016; Borumandnia et al, 2020; Mailhot Amborski et al, 2022). According to the UK's Office for National Statistics, 3.7% of disabled adults are survivors of sexual violence, compared to 1.9% of non-disabled adults (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Disabled women are at higher risk of sexual violence than non-disabled women or disabled men (Dunkle et al, 2018; Haraldsdóttir, 2018). In their UN report Dunkle et al (2018) argue that disability discrimination coupled with patriarchal attitudes place disabled women at increased risk of sexual violence. Furthermore, based on a national represented study of the US, Basile et al (2016) argue that the higher rates of sexual violence towards disabled people can be attributed to factors such as higher daily living dependency needs. There are also numerous systematic barriers that deter disabled women from seeking justice (Buckley, 2020). Furthermore, it can be argued that the reason disabled survivors have been overlooked is due to the omission of disabled people from the discourse of sexuality (Loeser et al, 2018; Chambers, 2023). This can be attributed to perceptions relating to disability and sexuality.

Disabled people are often perceived as asexual or hypersexual (Shakespeare, 2000; Bonnie, 2004; Esmail et al, 2010; Pebdani and Tashjian, 2022; Chambers, 2023). More specifically, people with dwarfism are often represented as asexual, hypersexualized, or as a fetish (Pritchard, 2021b), depending on the context. In reference to being hypersexual, there is a well-known rumour that, during the filming of the 1937 classic film *The Wizard of Oz*, some of the actors who played the Munchkins were depicted as drunks who misbehaved, including sexually assaulting the then 17-year-old Judy Garland (Harmetz, 2013). While the accuracy of this rumour has been questioned, the popularity of *The Wizard of Oz*, where 124 people with dwarfism were brought together, at the Culver Hotel, to play the role of the Munchkins (Harmetz, 2013), constructs them as hypersexualized people. This rumour has often provoked humour, which is no doubt influenced by the metanarrative of dwarfism, which constructed people with dwarfism as humorous beings (Pritchard, 2021b). This aids in ignoring the serious nature of sexual violence. This collective of people with dwarfism staying in one space, over a short period of time, is similar to conventions held by associations for people with dwarfism. Conventions are usually held in a hotel and are made up predominantly of people with dwarfism. Thus, this article is careful not to reinforce the belief that people with dwarfism are generally hypersexualized and actively engage in acts of sexual violence.

Disabled people's sexuality and ability to express themselves sexually has been oppressed in a variety of ways, including being sterilized, infantilized, and being prohibited from engaging in sexual activity and marriage (Bonnie, 2004; Pebdani and Tashjian, 2022). Disabled people's relationship barriers can be understood within

a social hierarchy in which they are marginalized and devalued compared to their non-disabled counterparts (Bahner, 2021). Furthermore, in relation to dwarfism, perceptions of height cannot be dismissed as they also play an important role in forming intimate relationships. With regard to height, taller men are perceived to be more attractive and have better mating success (Lasco, 2024). Women tend to prefer to date taller men (Osenky, 2018). While men prefer to date shorter women it does not mean that women with dwarfism are deemed datable. According to Shakespeare et al (2010), people with dwarfism are likely to be single and marry later in life compared to their average-sized counterparts. This claim can be supported by a variety of factors, including cultural representations of dwarfism which can lead to stigmatization.

As well as perceptions about disabled people, environmental barriers can impede disabled people's relationship opportunities (Shakespeare et al, 1996). Experiences of different spaces are dependent on a person's identity. Spaces can be gendered (Massey, 1994), sexed (Valentine, 1993), raced (Delany, 2002), ableist (Gleeson, 1999), and statuarized (Kruse, 2002). Massey (1994: 3) suggests that 'the social relations of space are experienced differently, and variously interpreted, by those holding different positions as part of it'. Spaces where people tend to date, such as bars and nightclubs, can be difficult for disabled people to access (Shakespeare et al, 1996). This can be the result of both spatial and social barriers. People with dwarfism experience both social stigma and physical barriers (Pritchard, 2021a), which not only impede their access but also how they are perceived and treated within that space. The lack of opportunities to date, and difficulties in finding a partner, can hinder disabled people's ability to form a relationship (Howland and Rintala, 2001; Chambers, 2023).

Internet dating can provide disabled people with the opportunity to find a partner without having to navigate inaccessible spaces. According to Santinile Martino and Moumos (2022), internet dating has become popular among disabled people, and as a result there are numerous dating sites that are specifically for disabled people. Furthermore, for those who use dating sites not specifically for disabled people, internet dating provides them with the opportunity to conceal their disability, as the internet allows a disembodied interaction (Saltes, 2013). However, disabled people using online dating platforms have reported experiences of abuse after disclosing their disability (Porter et al, 2017). It must be acknowledged that while internet dating has provided disabled people with other avenues for dating, it has also become another possible unsafe space. For example, Gillett (2023) points out that the use of dating apps, such as Tinder, provides another avenue for women's experiences of sexual violence. However, this article is not focusing on virtual spaces, which offer both pros and cons to disabled people's dating opportunities, but rather a physical space, which is still popular for people with dwarfism.

A safe space is not just about physical safety, but also about providing psychological, social and emotional safety (Hartal, 2017), that can provide better opportunities to date. Due to various minority groups experiencing discrimination, and to some degree violence, within everyday spaces, many have constructed their own safe spaces. A safe space suggests that other spaces are unsafe (Roestone Collective, 2014). These spaces become safe by purposeful decisions regarding who should occupy them (Zukin, 1990). Safe spaces were originally a product of the women's movement, but have since become adopted by various minorities (Roestone Collective, 2014), such as the LGBTQ+ communities (Moran et al, 2001; Fox and Ore, 2010; Hartal, 2017).

and racial minorities ([hooks, 1990](#)). They are spaces that can permit marginalized groups to create spaces that are free of discrimination, harassment and violence. For example, queer spaces ([Hartal, 2017](#)) are a response to heteronormative spaces that often include homophobic attitudes and practices. Furthermore, [hooks \(1990\)](#) points out that the home has been used as a safe space for African Americans, offering a space for solidarity and resistance to racism. Associations can be considered safe spaces for people with dwarfism.

According to [Kruse \(2002\)](#), spaces are physically constructed to suit the average-sized person and contain messages that encourage tallness to be revered, in what he terms ‘statuarized spaces’. Conventions for people with dwarfism become ‘re-statuarized’ in order to accommodate the needs of people with dwarfism, not just in terms of physical access, but also in terms of the meaning of that space. They become places for people with dwarfism, where they can not only find medical information and support about dwarfism, but also meet and speak to like-minded individuals. For this reason, the American disability rights activist and woman with dwarfism, Rebecca Cokely, has also identified associations for people with dwarfism as safe spaces ([Cokely, 2022](#)). However, this may not necessarily be agreed upon by all people with dwarfism, for various reasons. People with dwarfism occupy numerous identities and thus it cannot be presumed that all will deem associations as safe spaces. However, as this article shows, the purposeful construction of associations supposedly makes them a safe space for people with dwarfism.

Conventions allow for a sense of normalization. They are spaces where everyone experiences the same physical barriers, meaning that there is no attention or shame if they cannot reach something or have to interact with a facility differently; for example, if they have to use a stool provided by the hotel to reach the bar. Furthermore, for one weekend there are none of the usual social barriers, such as name calling or staring, which can otherwise impact their self-esteem. Everyone shares the same condition, creating their own normative standards. According to [Ablon \(1981\)](#), conventions enable people with dwarfism a space without stigmatization, and thus they have better self-esteem while within those spaces; therefore, they can be considered safe spaces for people with dwarfism.

The re-statuarization of the space permits people with dwarfism to engage in various social activities, including the possibility of finding an intimate partner. [Ablon \(1984\)](#), [Kruse \(2002\)](#), [Pritchard \(2019\)](#), and [Weinberg \(1968\)](#) have all noted that many people with dwarfism attend conventions held by associations in order to find an intimate partner. Furthermore, [Ablon \(1984\)](#) noted that the majority of participants in their study had met their partners at a convention for people with dwarfism. This was also mentioned by [Kruse \(2002\)](#), whose participants were a married couple with dwarfism who had met at an LPA convention. Conventions still remain a key space for people with dwarfism to meet a potential partner. It is what [Bolt \(2019\)](#) refers to as the ‘unforbidden relationship’: a relationship between two disabled people. Unlike the ‘forbidden relationship’ which occurs between a disabled and non-disabled person, the unforbidden relationship does not cross the normative divide. Therefore, it can be argued that these spaces offer increased opportunities for the unforbidden relationship. The forbidden relationship is not only the result of prejudiced attitudes from non-disabled people, as one may assume. [Howland and Rintala \(2001\)](#) found that disabled people often prefer to date other disabled people, for reasons such as having a better understanding of their disability. While this reason should not

be discouraged, [Ablon \(1984\)](#) points out how some members of associations are prejudiced towards others dating and marrying averaged-sized people, suggesting a problematic belief that insinuates that only a person with dwarfism should date another person with dwarfism.

Safe spaces are only considered safe if they provide protection from harassment, abuse and misogyny ([Lewis et al, 2015](#)). However, the notion of a safe space is often based only on one identity, and thus fails to consider intersecting identities. The binary logic of safe spaces neglects other 'isms', such as sexism or racism, that members may experience ([Fox and Ore, 2010](#)). Intersectionality permits a more complex understanding of the way people are discriminated against and disempowered due to multiple identities ([Crenshaw, 1991](#)). Intersectionality has spatial connotations ([Valentine, 2007](#)) which question the construction of safe spaces. Safe spaces can contain their own internal power imbalances, depending on their members' intersecting identities. For example, [hook's \(1990\)](#) notion of the home being a safe space for African Americans can also include incidents of domestic violence towards African American women, making them unsafe. As a result, a safe space is never completely safe ([Roestone Collective, 2014](#)). While conventions should not be dismissed as safe spaces for fostering intimate relationships, it is also important to note how these spaces can also encourage unwanted behaviours associated with gender and sexual violence. Sexual violence is associated with power ([Gravelin et al, 2019](#)), and thus women who are sexually assaulted become disempowered within these spaces.

Methodology

The main aim of this research was to uncover experiences of sexual misconduct at conventions for people with dwarfism, experienced specifically by people with dwarfism who have previously engaged or continue to engage in these spaces. The research question aimed to uncover 'What kinds of experiences have people with dwarfism had in relation to sexual misconduct while attending conventions for associations for people with dwarfism?'

Positionality

There are several reasons why I felt the need to explore the experiences of sexual violence at associations for people with dwarfism. I am a person with dwarfism, and back in 2010 I was sexually assaulted at a convention held by a UK association ([Pritchard, 2019](#)). Unfortunately, despite reporting the incident to the association, instead of being offered support I was threatened with legal action by the association for writing about the incident within my PhD thesis. 'When some people complain they are wronged, they are treated as being wrong' ([Ahmed, 2021: 160](#)). This has prevented me from ever wanting to attend another convention, as I do not consider them safe spaces for women with dwarfism.

As a member of several social media pages for people with dwarfism, I noticed other women posting about similar experiences at conventions and questioning whether it was something that impacted others or just them. I began to realize that my experience was not an isolated incident. This prompted me to conduct this research to enable a collective voice.

Recruitment and participant demographics

Recruitment was conducted between November 2022 and November 2023. The inclusion criteria included all people with dwarfism who have attended conventions and been the victim of sexual misconduct within these spaces. To recruit participants the project was advertized on several groups for people with dwarfism on the social networking site Facebook. Social media has been argued to be a beneficial tool for recruiting people with dwarfism, who are often spread over a wide geographical area but engage with social media groups to connect with others from around the world (Pritchard, 2021d). There are numerous groups on Facebook specifically for people with dwarfism, including LPWomen, Achondroplasia!, and LPA Advocacy, to name but a few. After posting the project on one particular Facebook group, I received the following comment:

I don't know, people are allowed to hit on people. I imagine LP guys have a hard enough time without being made to feel crap for hitting on people at LP conventions. Also - it's possible that the harassment is actually just a lack of practice and clumsiness, cause you know ... the rest of the world.

Just to confirm, this article is not condemning people looking for a date when at a convention, but exploring experiences of sexual violence, which are never excusable. While men with dwarfism do experience social stigma and may not have the right skills when it comes to trying to find a date, that does not mean that sexually harassing or assaulting someone is ever excusable. It also ignores the fact that women with dwarfism also experience social stigma which can make dating difficult. Furthermore, the survey was open to any gender and thus the commentator came to their own conclusion regarding who are the perpetrators of sexual violence.

Disabled women are often labelled as 'damaged goods' when it comes to dating, and subsequently relationship difficulties are greater for disabled women compared to disabled men (Howland and Rintala, 2001). However, it is not unusual for others, in particular men, to defend perpetrators of sexual assault (Pritchard and Edwards, 2023). Furthermore, Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994) point out that particular attitudes often justify sexual assault towards women. In this case, men with dwarfism 'have a hard time' and are just 'clumsy'. It is argued that disabled people often lack social skills, including when it comes to dating (Howland and Rintala, 2001). However, this comment impacted my emotional well-being, because as a survivor I once again felt disbelieved and guilty of inappropriate behaviour for daring to speak out. I also felt that the person's comment could prevent other survivors from coming forward. To further aid recruitment, I contacted the largest association for people with dwarfism, who shared the survey among its members.

In total, 14 people responded to the survey. According to Boddy (2016), small sample sizes can still generate important information. While this can be considered a small sample size, the aim was not to make any generalized findings but to highlight the experiences of victims, and thus to address the issue by suggesting recommendations to minimize the occurrence of sexual violence at associations for people with dwarfism.

All participants were over 18 years of age and, unsurprisingly, all survivors identified as female. This is not to ignore that men can also be survivors of sexual violence, but most survivors do tend to be women (National Sexual Violence

Resource Centre, 2015; Black et al, 2011; Williamson and Serner, 2018). The online nature of social media offered the ability for the survey to be completed by an international set of participants. However, the survey was in English and shared among groups that are largely based in the UK, North America and Australia. As a result, all responses were from those living in Western countries, the majority of whom were based in the US. The link to the survey was shared on these groups several times throughout the year. This helped to remind people of the research as well as advertizing the project to group members who may have not seen it previously.

Surveys

The data was collected via an online survey. ‘An *online survey* refers to a self-administered questionnaire that collects data from respondents using the Web as the mode of data collection’ (Tuten, 2010: 179). This enables the collection of data from a wide network. Online surveys are considered to be a quick and inexpensive method (Berzofsky et al, 2019). Surveys were conducted online from November 2022 to November 2023 via Jisc online surveys. A longer field period, in this case a year, aids in increasing the representativeness of the population (Berzofsky et al, 2019).

Due to the nature of the topic, it was important to provide participants with more anonymity and less pressure to answer questions that may have been triggering for them. Due to their nature, no researcher needed to be present when participants were completing the survey, providing them with greater anonymity. There was also no pressure to answer questions that they did not want to. Online surveys are a beneficial method for conducting research on sensitive topics including sexual assault (Berzofsky et al, 2019); they provided participants the freedom to participate at a time most appropriate for them, as well as the ability not to feel rushed in their responses. In relation to research on sensitive topics, online surveys have been found to provoke more honest answers (Kays et al, 2013). This may be because they do not feel pressured by the presence of a researcher.

Online surveys present numerous benefits, including a wide range of question formats (Tuten, 2010). Most questions were open-ended allowing participants to write as much or as little as they wanted. This I felt was particularly important as it meant that, unlike interviews, there was no interviewer pushing them for more detailed responses. However, this can also be a limitation, due to the inability to probe participant’s responses further in order to gain a deeper insight into their responses, including the ability to clarify answers. Of course, while detailed responses provide richer data, due to the sensitive nature of the subject it is important to protect their emotional well-being.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze and code the data. Thematic analysis is used to identify relevant themes within the data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). This method involves drawing out relevant themes through reading and rereading the survey data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This process enabled me to generate relevant codes from the data. Coding the data enabled me to identify relevant themes, such as feeling unsafe, experiences of sexual harassment and assault, and experiences of sexual misconduct as a teenager.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by my institution on 31 October 2022. While ethical considerations are important in any research project, they can be considered more so in a research topic exploring a sensitive issue, such as sexual violence. Research on sexual violence can provoke unwanted memories and distressing emotions (Drauker, 1999). Due to the nature of online surveys it is impossible to observe participant behaviours which could be an indicator of harm as a result of the research. Thus, researchers need to anticipate possible harm and find ways to minimize it (Campbell et al, 2019).

To minimize any harm, I adopted a trauma-informed approach, which has been argued to be an appropriate approach when conducting research on sexual violence (Campbell et al, 2019). For example, participants were referred to as ‘survivors’ rather than ‘victims’ (O’Shea et al, 2024). The initial survey page outlined the project and provided information to participants, such as the right to withdraw and to skip questions. This information was provided using transparent and sensitive language, which did not indicate any repercussions if they decided to withdraw at any point (Campbell et al, 2019). The page also offered the contact details of relevant support groups, such as Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), if needed. For participants it can be a cathartic experience and an initial step towards seeking relevant support (Drauker, 1999). These support groups were specific to sexual violence and there were a number provided from numerous countries, due to the international context of the study. However, it can be questioned whether this is enough to ensure the well-being of the participants. Campbell et al (2019) also suggest enabling participants to contact the researcher. My university email address was shared with participants at the beginning and end of the survey. This would allow them to contact me with any further questions or concerns. Near the end of the survey they were also asked if they would like to be contacted by the researcher after they had completed the survey, to check to see how they were feeling. This would act as a debrief session and enable the researcher to provide them with any further resources if required (Campbell et al, 2019). However, no participant agreed to be contacted.

All participants have been provided with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. While this is a general obligation of any research, I felt that it was important to protect participants, as I did not want them to be identified by any association or their members in case they decided to respond to them inappropriately. Every attempt has also been made to anonymize associations.

Results: being unsafe in a safe space

Due to social stigma, which impacts dating opportunities for people with dwarfism, conventions offer them a limited opportunity to date in the same way as their average-sized counterparts. For most people with dwarfism, evening activities held by associations offer the first opportunity for them to find a potential intimate partner (Ablon, 1984). While both men and women with dwarfism may use conventions to find a partner, how they go about it can differ, as can their experiences of these spaces. In spaces associated with dating, ‘women must negotiate highly gendered and sexualized spaces of the patriarchal night-time economy and their bodies within them’ (Waitt et al, 2011: 261). Furthermore, annual conventions are usually only a

few days to a week long and thus there is a time restraint for those wanting to find a partner (Pritchard, 2019), which may further impact their behaviours. While these spaces do increase opportunities for dating, it also raises the possibility of rejection: 'A man I'd never spoken to came up to me and was attempting to flirt as I was speaking with others. He thought he knew me. He then asked when we were going to my room. I said we're not. He then called me a bitch' (Participant B).

While flirting can be deemed an acceptable experience, because Participant B refused the perpetrator's offer they were met with sexist hate speech. This hate speech is not uncommon in situations of rejection, and can be linked to misogynistic attitudes which render women subservient to men (Srivastava et al, 2017). The perpetrator may have been shocked at the fact that a woman with dwarfism was rejecting him, and suggests a gender hierarchy. Safe spaces can contain hierarchies and their own exclusionary practices (Hartal, 2017), in this case sexist attitudes informed by misogyny, coupled with the fact that conventions are often held at hotels, making it easier for perpetrators to believe that going to the victim's hotel room gives them more of a reason to believe that they are highly likely to find a partner. However, this belief can lead to members viewing others as potential partners, as well as commodities, due to male domination:

Never had I ever thought of myself as an object of such sexual desire, and I didn't know what to do. It was like my entire reality shifted. No one was seeing me as a person (again!) – they were seeing me as something they wanted, and they expected me to just want that too. This was infused into every interaction: someone would ask me to dance at the banquet and what they were really saying was 'If we dance then we're a thing and we're either going to date or hook up'. This was not a language I spoke. Everything was reduced to sex. It was crushing. (Participant B)

The expectations of men with dwarfism can be deemed controlling. While both men and women with dwarfism are likely to experience social stigma, which can impact their dating opportunities outside of conventions, that does not mean that both attend conventions for the purposes of dating or there are equal power relations. 'Intersectionality is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its relationship to power' (Crenshaw, 2015). Participant B became objectified because of her identity as a woman with dwarfism, which was disempowering due to misogynistic behaviours from some men with dwarfism. To be objectified means that attention is directed toward their physical rather than mental qualities (Heflick and Goldenberg, 2014). The men assumed that because they shared the same condition they were automatically compatible, ignoring any personal qualities. What can be considered more problematic is the objectification of teenagers: 'I watched grown men start countdowns for when certain young women turn 18' (Participant A); 'I went to my first [name] national conference when I was 16. I went with a female LP friend who was 18. From the moment we stepped into that hotel I felt like a sexual object' (Participant D).

People with dwarfism experience being stared at within everyday spaces, due to their non-normative body size. However, at conventions, while their body size becomes normalized, for women the gaze is transferred to their femininity. In both spaces, the gaze is disempowering. The male gaze is associated with patriarchal surveillance of women's bodies (Glapka, 2018). The gaze is associated with power (Foucault, 1979), and constructs the women with dwarfism as sexualized objects. Countdowns suggest

that some men with dwarfism are already interested in young women with dwarfism, but must not engage romantically with them, including flirting, until they are at the age of consent. This still objectifies their bodies and impacts how they experience conventions, which can be disempowering. Disabled children, including adolescents, are at increased risk of sexual violence (Ariksson-Schmidt et al, 2010) as they are deemed more vulnerable. Depending on where in the world an association is located, the ages for consent will slightly differ. For example, the age of consent in the UK is 16 whereas in the US it ranges from 16 to 18, depending on the state. In the US conventions are held annually in different states, and thus the boundaries between who is acceptable to date will differ. However, it is also important to consider the age difference between members. Participants A and C recall being objectified as teenagers by much older men: 'I can also recall as a young teenager being asked to dance or gawked at, my body commented on out loud by much older men' (Participant C); 'I had older men buy me drinks starting at 15' (Participant A).

Unlike typical night-time spaces, such as bars, conventions are full of both children and adults with dwarfism, including during some evening activities. Although younger children with dwarfism will be in bed in their family hotel room, teenagers can still partake in these activities. This makes them more vulnerable, especially with the presence of alcohol. Due to the nature of conventions, most include activities associated with the night-time economy, such as dancing and the ability to drink at the hotel bar. This offers members the ability to look for a potential partner. While night-time economy spaces, such as bars and dance spaces, are universally accepted in most western societies as spaces that offer the opportunity for people to look for an intimate relationship, they are known as potentially unsafe spaces for women (Brooks, 2011; 2020; Waitt et al, 2011; Graham et al, 2014; Fernandes et al, 2025). There are typical gendered norms associated with the night-time economy, where female bodies are objectified under the male gaze (Waitt et al, 2011). What is more problematic is that these participants were teenagers when they experienced what is not only sexual harassment, but possible grooming. A specific aspect of grooming involves gaining access to and compliance from a child (Whittle et al, 2013), in the case of Participant A, buying them drinks when they were only 15 years old. While buying drinks for teenagers is considered inappropriate, it only constitutes grooming if the motive is to receive sexual favours (Spenard and Cash, 2022). In a number of cases, when participants discussed sexual violence there was often alcohol involved.

A number of participants mentioned drinking being involved when speaking about experiences of sexual violence. While it is not unusual for others to buy a person a drink, alcohol is known to increase the risk of sexual assault (Abbey et al, 2001; Felson and Burchfield, 2004). The intentions of the male respondents that the participants mention imply that they had ulterior motives for providing them with alcohol:

Because this was my first national conference no one had seen me before and that apparently also made me very attractive to LP guys. Every interaction I had with a male LP during that conference was sexualized. The second we sat down to wait in the lobby guys were all around us and flirting with me, offering us alcohol and just being really intense. I couldn't be by myself without a guy approaching me and wanting to 'hang' – or inviting me to a 'wet t-shirt contest', or lightly touching me, telling me I was hot, etc. It completely freaked me out (Participant D)

Sexualized suggestive comments are unwanted comments, which not only disrupt the purpose of the space for the victim, but can also turn a supposedly safe space into an unsafe one. Crawford (2000: 220) acknowledges that sexual humour 'maintains a sexist social order'. While the invitation to a wet t-shirt competition may be interpreted by some as a joke, as an association would never hold such an event, it is a suggestive comment that objectifies them. These behaviours are further pronounced with the involvement of alcohol. Abbey et al (2001) point out that the consumption of alcohol by perpetrators and survivors tends to co-concur. On the part of the perpetrators, it can make them more confident in their actions, including making lewd comments. As a result, Participant D felt unsafe to be alone.

... and I didn't understand what was going on until it became clear that I could not be alone with any guys at that event. I remember being in a hotel room with my friend and a group of people, hanging out (there was alcohol) and at one point some of the LP guys started making super suggestive comments and I just looked up and caught the eye of one of the only AH guy in the room and he just nodded and said 'I'll walk you out'. That was such a destabilizing and reductive experience that I did not return to an [name] event until the [name] National Conference a few years ago, when I desperately needed medical advice. (Participant D)

To be unable to be alone constructs conventions as an unsafe space for female members, who are reduced to sexual objects, apparent in the misogynistic attitudes and behaviours of some men. While survivors of sexual violence may not return, due to feeling unsafe, a conundrum is presented when conventions offer people with dwarfism invaluable support, including access to medical advice. While Participant D was supported by an average-sized member, Participants E and F demonstrate how being alone can lead to being sexually assaulted: 'I was in my late teens, early 20s, dancing with a male acquaintance and he got me to part of the dance floor furthest from those sitting at the tables and started rubbing my breasts' (Participant E).

It was at a fundraiser in [name of place], made by one of the mothers whose child had dwarfism. A man came up to the booth, friendly and bought a drink ticket. Came up again, and again I had to go inside the bar and get towels or ice, and I cannot remember which one. I was waiting for the bartender, and the same man was sitting on the barstool to my left. He looked at me and smiled, and I returned the exchange. He got up, walked up to me, breathed down my neck, and kissed me [neck]. (Participant F)

These experiences suggest that some members plan their actions, such as ensuring that the victim is away from others and thus there is less chance of them having any witnesses. The previous actions appear innocent, such as wanting to dance, but it is only after the incident that the victim realizes that these were ulterior motives. These incidents can make it more dangerous and subsequently more difficult for female members to participate in certain activities at conventions, such as socializing, especially without proper support or safeguarding. Participant A reported being drugged: 'I was drugged at an [name] convention and the leadership of the

organization instead told people I was a drug addict and demonized me instead of doing anything about the culture of the organization' (Participant A).

Drugged or drink spiking is a form of drug-assisted sexual assault (Sheard, 2011). While survivors of sexual assault are encouraged to speak out, they are often disbelieved and sometimes blamed for the incident (Abbey et al, 2001). Negative reactions from others, such as disbelieving the victim, can also be traumatic (Gravelin et al, 2019), which further disempowers them within a supposedly safe space. Not only was Participant A disbelieved, but their reputation was also impacted by the association's disbelief of their experience. Common myths associated with sexual assault include being intoxicated and thus not being a credible witness (Jozkowski et al, 2021). However, there are also more sinister reasons related to protecting the reputation of the association. According to Ahmed (2021) one of the reasons some people are dismissive of complaints is because of how it may threaten their bond with the institution, in this case associations for people with dwarfism. The leader is likely to have a strong bond with the association, they may have been members since childhood and have strong bonds with many other members. Furthermore, drink spiking is deemed a dangerous act, the thought of which challenges the safe nature of conventions. Therefore, it becomes easier or safer for leaders to dismiss or blame the individual who is making the complaint, as it maintains the reputation of the association.

Conclusion

This article has adopted an intersectional approach to challenging the perceived notion of conventions for people with dwarfism as safe spaces. While the re-statuarization of the space supposedly makes it a safe space for people with dwarfism, the gendered nature of these spaces results in unequal power relations, evident through the objectification of women with dwarfism, resulting in them becoming unsafe spaces. This is concerning, as the purpose of conventions is to empower all people with dwarfism and provide them with a level of safety that is denied to them in wider society. These reports of sexual violence at associations for people with dwarfism should not be dismissed. They highlight how supposedly safe spaces for people with dwarfism can become unsafe spaces depending on other identities held by members, such as gender and age.

People with dwarfism experience social stigma within typical everyday spaces, including social and leisure spaces, which can impact dating opportunities. Conventions provide a space where they are destigmatized and can experience typical dating practices. However, as is the case with everyday social and leisure spaces, especially those associated with the night-time economy, conventions become gendered spaces, allowing for incidents of sexual violence and resulting in them being unsafe spaces. The behaviours of men and women differ, and suggest that the latter tend to be objectified within these spaces. This, coupled with a possible lack of dating skills, may lead to men with dwarfism being overly intense, resulting in actions that can be considered as sexual violence.

While this article has focused specifically on sexual violence at associations for people with dwarfism, it is important to explore spaces outside of associations. It is also important not to dismiss men with dwarfism as survivors of sexual violence. For example, Aubrey Taylor, a man with dwarfism, was sexually assaulted in a deli in New York. Despite reporting the incident to the New York police, no appropriate

action was taken (Pritchard, 2023). Thus, the issue of sexual violence in relation to dwarfism may be more complex in terms of reporting, especially when disabled people are often deemed asexual.

Recommendations

- Associations need to employ clear guidance to members that sets clear boundaries about how to behave towards other members when attending conventions.
- Associations could run workshops that provide clear guidance and support when it comes to dating. This could not only be applicable within conventions but also for dating in other spaces.
- Clear guidance is required for associations to deal with issues of sexual assault, including how to respond appropriately when members report incidents.

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