

# Women with disabilities

## Who are women with disabilities?

Nearly one in every five Victorian women has a disability. *We are everywoman. We are doctors, lawyers, health and community service workers, playwrights and teachers. We are also unemployed and keen to work.*

*We are mothers and carers, actively sexual and celibate, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and heterosexual.*

*We live on farms, in regional communities, in urban high rise and in the suburbs. We follow football and dance, go to TAFE and university. We value public transport and accessible buildings.*

*We are religious from many faiths and non-religious from many perspectives. We are diverse in our ideologies but passionate about our right to be recognised as ordinary women... with a disability.*

## What barriers do we face?

We encounter discrimination on many levels, each of which restricts our opportunities for equal participation in economic, social, educational and political life.

Some women with disabilities experience multiple layers of discrimination based on their race, age, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as their disability.

We are often ignored in government legislation, policies and programs and our needs are not adequately recognised within community organisations and services.

“ I want everyone to remember people with disabilities are people of worth. We have a right to be treated with respect. We have a right to safety.” Jane, WDV member

We have traditionally been excluded from the mainstream women's social movement whilst issues of concern to women with disabilities have not been addressed by the broader disability advocacy movement.

On all measures of social and economic participation (housing security, income, employment and education), women with disabilities are disadvantaged compared to women and men without disabilities. We also experience higher levels of disadvantage than men with disabilities when it comes to employment and income levels.

As women with disabilities, we lack access to adequate health care and other services for ourselves and our children, particularly when health centres fail to provide a welcoming, inclusive environment with accessible parking, accessible toilets and accessible examination tables etc.

Women with disabilities are targeted by people who use violence, including by intimate partners. We are also less likely to know about or have access to services responding to violence against women.

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## What will help?

- Challenge the stereotypes of gender: few women fit the stereotype of beauty that women are expected to meet.
- Challenge disability stereotypes: women with disabilities are diverse. The stereotype suggests we are passive, dependent on others and in need of protection.
- Focus on women's abilities: What we can do far outweighs what we can't.
- Listen to women with disabilities about what we want and what will best meet our needs. We are the experts and understand what works best for us.
- Apply a gender and disability lens to policy, program development and investment and ensure that data on disability and gender is collected.
- Provide information in a range of accessible formats so everyone can access your information.
- Involve women with disabilities at every level of your service/program – from planning to delivery and as a part of your governance structure.

## What is our vision?

Our vision is that needs and aspirations of women and girls with disabilities will be taken seriously. Here are some examples of how this vision will look.

- A 15 year-old girl with cerebral palsy will be encouraged to study at university.
- A woman with an intellectual disability who reports rape will be taken seriously by the police and the justice system.
- A woman with a cognitive disability will have her health concerns listened to by her doctor.
- A mother with multiple sclerosis will get personal care that assists her to bathe and dress her child.
- Specialist schools and disability services will provide education on and promote healthy relationships and sexual health.
- Women with disabilities will be able to compete for paid work and lead the lifestyle of their choice.

## “ In which ways do you feel socially included?”

“I experience social inclusion through being employed, enjoying relationships with family and friends, utilising public transport, access to health services, freedom of movement through the built environment, access to electronic information, access to education.”

“Even on a very basic level I still can't get a wheelchair into 50 per cent of shops in the local shopping strip... 'Advanced' accessibility for housebound folk is way off the radar.”

“I feel like many spaces are dominated by men. Either they take up all the air space and don't let women have a say, or they try and hit on you which makes me uncomfortable...”

“...and I don't feel safe. There are barriers to accessible, affordable housing, accessible, affordable transport, to employment... I think there are probably more barriers to social inclusion than I can know.”

“They are like the unknown unknowns, because if I absolutely don't have access to them, I don't even know about them.”

“My social life used to be visiting friends and family. Now (with a disability) I'm isolated and alone. Homes aren't universally designed. If I want to see people they have to come to me. Public buildings are a bit more accessible. But homes are where a lot of socialising happens.”

*Survey responses from Victorian women with disabilities, used to inform Women with Disabilities Victoria's submission to the Victorian Parliament's Family and Community Development Committee Inquiry into Social Inclusion and Victorians with a Disability (February 2014).*

## About Women with Disabilities Victoria

Women with Disabilities Victoria is run by women with disabilities for women with disabilities. Our areas of focus are:

- Empowering women with disabilities
- Advocacy to government and service providers
- Professional education.

For more information contact our office:

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Membership is open to both individuals and to organisations who share our aims, and is free for women with disabilities.

[www.wdv.org.au/get\\_involved.htm#Membership](http://www.wdv.org.au/get_involved.htm#Membership)