# Valuing Lived Expertise Can Improve Healthcare Access for Women with Disabilities

By Dr Parimala Srikanteshwara and Helen Freris

## Introduction

Women with disabilities face significant challenges in accessing healthcare due to the intersection of ableism and gender discrimination. This article explores the Experts in Our Health project, whose goal was to improve healthcare access by valuing the lived experiences of women with disabilities.

## Barriers to Health Access

Women with disabilities encounter multiple barriers to accessing healthcare, including:

- High costs of medical services

- Inaccessible information and facilities

- Socio-economic, gender and disability marginalisation

- Lack of disability knowledge among healthcare providers

- Inappropriate and inaccurate assumptions

These barriers are often compounded for women who also identify with other marginalized communities, such as LGBTQIA+ or culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

## The Experts in Our Health Project

Women with Disabilities Victoria (WDV) initiated the "Experts in Our Health" project to address these challenges. The project focused on:

1. Empowering women with disabilities through self-advocacy

2. Co-designing resources with women who have lived experiences of disability

3. Providing peer-led workshops and training for healthcare workforces

## Co-Design Matters

Co-design is a participatory approach that engages end-users in the development process. The project adopted accessible co-design processes for:

- Concept development

- Design of resources and training

- Dissemination strategies

This approach ensured that the voices and experiences of women with disabilities were central to all project stages.

## Implementation

The project implemented Communities of Practice (CoPs) for two groups:

1. Diverse women with disabilities

2. Healthcare workforce staff

## Key Outputs

- 12 lived experience Health Experts co-designed resources and CoP sessions

- 8 online advocate CoPs created on relevant themes, with over 20 women participating

- 30 healthcare professionals attended 4 bimonthly Workforce CoP sessions

11 resources for women with disabilities were produced in a range of accessible formats including fact sheets, a video, guide to health services, posters and an evaluation report.

The resources can be accessed at:

<https://www.wdv.org.au/our-work/our-work-with-women/experts-in-our-health/>

## Key Recommendations

1 Health access for women with disabilities from diverse communities across Victoria should be supported with appropriate co-designed information in accessible formats.

2 Health service providers should create partnerships, collaborate and engage in meaningful ongoing ways with disability self-advocacy organisations.

3 Health Service Providers should engage women with disabilities in meaningful co-design processes and develop resources that empower women with disabilities to make informed decisions about their healthcare.

4 Women with disabilities should have access to peer learning and support programs, co-designed and facilitated by lived-experience advocates.

5 Health service providers should use strategic planning opportunities to identify and resource co-designed programs increasing service access for women with disabilities.

6 Higher education providers should collaborate with disability self-advocacy organisations to embed lived experience perspectives into the education of health and community services professionals.

7 Health service providers should increase the participation and employment of women with disabilities in the design and delivery of services.

8 Health service staff and leaders should engage in ongoing professional learning that focuses on disability access and co-design.

## Conclusion

The Experts in Our Health project demonstrated the value of incorporating lived experience in improving healthcare access for women with disabilities. By centring their voices and expertise, we can create more inclusive and effective healthcare systems.