

Safety & Respect: Women with Disabilities & Family Violence Forum Summary

On 13 March 2019, fifty participants explored how to strengthen responses to women with disabilities who experience family violence, at a forum organised by NIFVS in partnership with Women with Disabilities Victoria (WDV). Keynote speaker Leah Van Poppel, CEO WDV, highlighted that when women with a disability have the support they need, their disability is not a barrier.

Why women with disabilities?

Women with disabilities experience family violence at twice the rate of other women.

Yet they have considerably fewer pathways to safety, justice and recovery when compared to women without disabilities.



From left: Kelly Parry, Jen Hargreaves, Nicole Lee, Ada Conroy, Sarah Johnson, Jane Rosengrove, Leah Van Poppel, Alyssa Fooks, Tess Karembelas

Existing Wisdom

Before the forum, participants shared their existing knowledge.

- Women with disabilities have strengths and know best how to manage their safety - it is us (workers) who need to listen to them.
- If violent partners are also their carers, women are especially at risk.
- There are often layers of complexity that services do not realise, including reliance on carers and fear about who will provide support if women try to access family violence services.
- Disability is often taken into account, but not in a compounding, intersectional way.

Barriers

Panelists highlighted additional barriers faced by women with disabilities.

- Some women with disabilities have 'never been allowed to have an independent voice'.
- Women with disabilities experience higher rates of discrimination, are less likely to report to police, and are less likely to be believed.
- Previous negative experience with government organisations might impact on women's help seeking.
- Carers may speak on behalf of a woman as if she can't speak for herself.
- Workers may overlook that carers can be perpetrators.

Women with Disabilities & Family Violence

Advice For Workers

Panellists with lived experience suggested that workers:

- See women without their carer.
- Ask how they can assist and what a woman needs, rather than focussing on what a woman can't do due to disability.
- Take time to develop a safety plan and breaking down the steps if needed.
- Use appropriate communication aids/material e.g. AUSLAN interpreter, Easy English information.
- Encourage women with disabilities to join advocacy groups to build confidence.

"I went to planning meetings and he (my partner/carers) would do all the talking and make all the decisions. Would a worker let that occur if you took disability out of the equation?"

Nicole Lee, Panellist



Improving Our Responses

Participants discussed strategies to enhance responses for themselves and their organisations:

- ⇒ Engage women with disabilities in the development of programs, services and policy.
- ⇒ Provide employment opportunities for women with disabilities.
- ⇒ Collect data on women with disabilities accessing the service including whether their carer is also their partner.
- ⇒ Create more opportunities for workers to challenge their own prejudices, biases and assumptions.
- ⇒ Design accessible environments.

Further Resources:

Visit www.nifvs.org.au to view the forum presentation and resources on [women with disabilities](#).

Visit www.wdv.org.au to sign up to the WDV eNews and Violence & Disability Quarterly and view the [Our Right to Safety and Respect: Video and Video Guide](#).