



# Position statement – violence against women with disabilities

This paper identifies Women with Disabilities Victoria's position on ways to prevent and respond to violence against women with disabilities.

## About Women with Disabilities Victoria

Women with Disabilities Victoria is an organisation run by women with disabilities for women with disabilities. We focus on issues of particular concern to women with disabilities: access to women's health, women and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and safety from violence.

Through advocacy, community engagement, education and research, we aim to advance real social and economic inclusion for women with disabilities in Victoria.

Because women with disabilities are more likely to experience violence and abuse than other members of the community, we dedicate particular attention to the issue of violence against women with disabilities. See our [Factsheet on violence](#) with contacts for support and information.

## Background

### Women with disabilities are a large and diverse population group in Victoria

- Nearly one in five women and girls have a disability.<sup>1</sup>
- The rate of disability for Victoria's culturally and linguistically diverse population is 22%, slightly higher than in the general population.<sup>2</sup>
- The proportion of Victorians with a disability is higher in rural and regional Victoria than in cities: 22% compared to 17%.<sup>3</sup>
- Nationally, 51% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls have a disability.<sup>4</sup>
- Women with disabilities face additional inequalities to men with disabilities; for example women are more likely to be unemployed,<sup>5</sup> have primary caring responsibilities and be affected by poverty.

### Understanding violence against women with disabilities

*Violence against women and disability-based violence* combine to increase the risk of violence against women with disabilities. These types of violence can be experienced differently depending on factors such as age (for example, what can be known as elder abuse), culture (lack of culturally appropriate support services) and location (lack of available support in regional areas).

Women with disabilities experiencing violence are likely to require services from two large, uncoordinated systems, both recognised as requiring improvements to support women

with disabilities. This need has been recognised through recent reforms and inquiries, such as the Royal Commission into Family Violence and inquiries into abuse in disability services.

## Violence against women

Violence against women describes forms of violence that are mostly experienced by women and mostly perpetrated by men.<sup>6</sup>

Men who use violence often target women who they see as less powerful, such as women with barriers to communicate to others what has happened to them and those restricted in their physical movement.<sup>7</sup>

The most prevalent form of violence experienced by Victorian women is family violence. This includes a range of controlling behaviours such as financial abuse, isolation, continual humiliation, psychological abuse, threats to harm children, injury and death.<sup>8</sup>

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2016 Personal Safety Survey found that women were significantly more likely than men to have experienced:

- An episode of stalking as an adult – 17% compared to 6.5%.
- Physical violence by a partner – 16% compared to 5.9%.
- Sexual assault since the age of 15 – 17% compared to 4.3%.
- Emotional abuse by a partner since the age of 15 – 23% compared to 16%.<sup>9</sup>

The 2017 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey (NCAS) found that:

- There has been an ongoing decline in awareness that men are more likely to commit family violence.
- 1 in 5 Australians believe family violence is a normal reaction to stress, and that sometimes a woman can make a man so angry he hits her without meaning to.
- 1 in 3 Australians believe that if a woman does not leave her abusive partner then she is responsible for the violence continuing.<sup>10</sup>



## Violence against people with disabilities

People who use violence abuse their power over people with disabilities. They may be providers of personal care in a private setting (such as an intimate partner or a family member) or in a service setting (for example, staff, managers or volunteers).<sup>11</sup> More needs to be understood about who uses violence against women with disabilities. Forms of violence include impairment related violence, denigration and unethical practices in care service settings.

The *Voices Against Violence* review of the files of 100 women with disabilities at the Office of the Public Advocate found that:

- 45 of the 100 women reported experiencing violence at the hands of a total of 89 perpetrators;
- The most common forms of violence reported were psychological, physical, controlling behaviour and economic abuse;
- Impairment-related abuse included withholding medication and disability aids.
- Many women experienced social isolation as both a risk factor for, and a consequence of, violence.
- Some perpetrators used social isolation as a form of violent behaviour in itself.

The numbers found in this review are particularly stark when we consider that violence against women is an under-reported crime.<sup>12</sup>

**Control** “I’ve been locked up in the house, basically not allowed to talk to no-one, not allowed to go down the street, not allowed to do what I want to do. I wasn’t allowed to talk on the phone, I wasn’t allowed to go anywhere unless he was with me.” Katrina<sup>13</sup>

**Threats** “To go on took a lot of faith and courage, it hadn’t worked before. I had been threatened by my dad that if I said anything, I would be put in a home and this was etched in my mind.” Jane<sup>14</sup>

**Constraint** “I wanted to leave this house to just have time away and I got off my wheelchair to change... into my clothes and he came in to my room and took a wheel off my wheel chair so I couldn’t then leave.” Michelle<sup>15</sup>

**Psychological abuse** “My ex-husband was always playing mind games with me... and kept telling my children I was psychotic.” Emma<sup>16</sup>

**Denigration** “It was a case of, you know, ‘you can’t cook’, ‘you’ll never be able to look after yourself’, ‘you’re disabled’ and it was always an emphasis on the ‘dis’... To me it was just, well this is what it’s like in families.” Louise<sup>17</sup>

## Position statement on Violence Against Women with Disabilities

Women with Disabilities Victoria recognises that:

1. Violence is not acceptable. Living free from violence is fundamental to quality of life.
2. Active participation of women with disabilities is critical in the development, implementation and evaluation of violence prevention and response policies and services. Women with disabilities currently remain vastly under-represented at all these levels.
3. Violence against women with disabilities must be understood in the context of the intersections between gender and disability. Through our Responsive Access Project, Women with Disabilities Victoria is developing training and resources for services in the family violence system and in the disability system to better understand and respond to women with disabilities experiencing violence.
4. Violence is preventable. Due to the high rates of violence against women with disabilities, there is an urgent need to undertake prevention programs. Women with Disabilities Victoria has piloted and evaluated a violence prevention program, the Gender and Disability Workforce



Development Program, which is now being expanded across Victoria.

5. There must be concerted action to address discriminatory attitudes and practices. Disability is not just a person’s condition, but the result of disabling social structures.
6. We all have a responsibility to act. The prevalence of violence in the lives of women with disabilities is a community concern, requiring leadership and coordination across departments and sectors.

## Recommendations for action

1. **Violence is not acceptable** – The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) standards of practice must recognise dynamics of power and control. Their workforces must be trained in upholding the safety of women with disabilities, which includes training on risk assessment and violence against women with disabilities.
2. **Listen to women with disabilities** – Government, human services and community organisations must provide avenues for women with disabilities to participate actively in decision-making and planning. It is important to recognise the strength and resilience of women with disabilities.
3. **Understand the causes** – Further research and improved data collection is needed to prevent and respond better to violence.
4. **Primary prevention** – Violence prevention and disability abuse prevention programs services must be inclusive of women with disabilities. Implementation of tailored prevention programs for women with disabilities is required.

5. **Access to justice** – Governments must continue to implement legislative reforms to legal responses to family violence.
6. **We all have a responsibility** – Levels of government and relevant departments need to collaborate and coordinate systems so that services are there for women with disabilities who experience violence.
7. **Working together** – With disability and family violence system reforms, we all need to find new ways to work together to prevent and respond to violence against women with disabilities.



## Contributors

Our thanks to the women with disabilities who shared their experiences to be quoted in this paper. Thanks also to those who contributed research and advice for this paper.

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