



# Asking The Experts

A guide to best practice co-design and consultation with women with disabilities.



Women's Health East

## Acknowledgement of Country

Women's Health East acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people, the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and future. We affirm that sovereignty was never ceded, and that colonialism and racism continue to impact on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and contribute to the high rates of violence they experience. We recognise the strength, resilience and leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and express our hope for and commitment to reconciliation.

## Acknowledgement of lived experience

Women's Health East acknowledges the lived experience of women with disabilities, neurodivergence, mental health conditions, and chronic illness, and their strength, knowledge, expertise and resilience. Women's Health East also acknowledges the many women with disabilities who have lived experience of discrimination and violence, and who through their tireless activism, have helped create social change. Women's Health East honours the women whose voices we do not get to hear because their lives have been taken through violence. Women's Health East acknowledges the importance of working to prevent violence against all women before it starts.

## Acknowledgements

Women's Health East would like to thank the members of the Margins to the Mainstream Experts Group. These women have generously contributed their time, knowledge, ideas and experiences to the design of this guide. Thank you to Jody, Julie-Ann, Sam, Sandra, Tamlyn and Vivienne.

Women's Health East also thanks Women with Disabilities Victoria for their input and support in the creation of this guide.

This project is funded by the Australian Department of Social Services.

All illustrations in this guide were prepared for the Margins to the Mainstream project by Blend Creative, a socially inclusive design studio. The design team includes women illustrators with disabilities. The illustrations were developed from 2021 to 2023, with input and feedback from the Experts Group. The illustrations were designed to align with this project's key messages and represent diverse women with disabilities.

For more information about the Margins to the Mainstream project, refer to the Margins to the Mainstream website: [whe.org.au/margins-to-the-mainstream](http://whe.org.au/margins-to-the-mainstream).

## Suggested citation

Women's Health East. (2023). *Asking the experts: A guide to best practice co-design and consultation with women with disabilities*. Melbourne, Australia.

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# About this guide

This guide promotes principled consultation and co-design with women with disabilities. It outlines a set of eight practices that enable ethical, effective work with wide-ranging benefits.

Created as part of Women's Health East's Margins to the Mainstream project, this guide was co-designed with the project's Experts – a group of seven women with disabilities who advocate to prevent violence against women with disabilities.

## Who is this guide for

This guide contains advice from women with disabilities for organisations and staff from a range of sectors working to engage women with disabilities in consultation or co-design.

## Notes on language

- > **Ableism:** the assumptions and behaviours that people without disabilities are better than people with disabilities, which leads to discrimination, disadvantage and violence.
- > **Gender inequality:** unequal status, opportunities, rights and outcomes for people of different genders.
- > **Sexism:** discrimination based on sex and gender that typically affects women and girls.

Ableism, gender inequality and sexism operate across society in social norms, systems, structures, communities, organisations, households, relationships and individual behaviours and attitudes.

- > **Expert:** the women with disabilities who are members of Women's Health East's Margins to the Mainstream project's Experts Group.
- > **Women with disabilities:** people who identify as women and who identify as having disability. This can include, but is not limited to, physical, cognitive, sensory and psychosocial impairments, neurodivergence and chronic illness.

This guide focuses on the experiences of women with disabilities rather than men with disabilities. This is because women with disabilities experience violence, abuse and discrimination at higher rates than men with disabilities or women without disabilities, as a result of intersecting forms of gender inequality and ableism.<sup>1</sup>

Women's Health East acknowledges that trans women and non-binary people with disabilities can experience barriers and discrimination in co-design and consultation that differ from the experiences of cisgender women with disabilities. This guide does not specifically address how cisnormativity or transphobia can impact co-design and consultation. However, it is hoped that this guide will go some way in supporting safer and more respectful co-design and consultation practices with trans women and non-binary people with disabilities.

# About the Margins to the Mainstream project

Margins to the Mainstream: Preventing violence against women with disabilities ('Margins to the Mainstream') is a project led by Women's Health East, in partnership with Women with Disabilities Victoria and the Together For Equality and Respect partnership.<sup>i</sup> Margins to the Mainstream commenced in March 2020 with funding from the Australian Department of Social Services.

Margins to the Mainstream aims to:

- > Elevate the voices of women with disabilities and promote their leadership and status in society.
- > Challenge intersecting sexist and ableist stereotypes.
- > Build the capacity of partners to prevent violence against women with disabilities.
- > Contribute to the evidence base of what works to prevent violence against women with disabilities.



<sup>i</sup> [Together For Equality and Respect](#) is a cross-sector partnership of over 30 organisations working to prevent violence against women in Melbourne's east.

# The work and impact of the Margins to the Mainstream Experts Group

This guide was co-designed with the Margins to the Mainstream Experts Group. This group of seven women with disabilities is central to this project's ongoing activities.

## Establishment of the Experts Group

After Women's Health East established the Experts Group in November 2020, members began to meet weekly via Zoom.<sup>i</sup> Current members - Jody, Julie-Ann, Sam, Sandra, Tamlyn and Vivienne – are still meeting regularly two and a half years later.<sup>ii</sup>

The Experts Group was established as a safe space for learning, sharing and connection.<sup>iii</sup> Experts can participate in ways that best suit them. This includes being able to pause their involvement and re-join the group, which takes account of changes in their circumstances.

## Experts Group activities

The initial Experts Group sessions centred on skills development. In these sessions, concepts such as gender inequality, ableism, intersectionality and violence prevention were unpacked and skills in communications and advocacy were developed. For many of the Experts, this was the first time they had learned about ableism and sexism or reflected on how these intersecting factors had shaped their lived experiences.

Since then, the Experts have worked closely together to develop social media campaigns, present at meetings and events, undertake consultations with several organisations, and co-design this guide. Five Experts have also featured in short co-designed videos that aim to prevent violence against women with disabilities.

To inform these activities, the Experts have worked together in numerous meetings and workshops. Group discussions have centred on their experiences of discrimination and inequality, reflections on what gender and disability equality mean to them, and visions for a society where the human rights of women with disabilities are respected.

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i For accessible recruitment, Women's Health East provided paperwork in different formats, including plain English. Written application forms were not a requirement. Interviews were informal and strengths-based.

ii There are currently seven members of the Experts Group. One member asked not to be named in this guide.

iii To facilitate an inclusive space, ground rules and a group agreement stressed the importance of communicating respectfully, upholding confidentiality and creating opportunities for all members to share.



Figure 1: illustration of an Experts Group Meeting on Zoom.

To inform these activities, the Experts have worked together in numerous meetings and workshops. Group discussions have centred on their experiences of discrimination and inequality, reflections on what gender and disability equality mean to them, and visions for a society where the human rights of women with disabilities are respected.

## Features of the Experts Group

Central to the Experts' experience in this project has been working together, as a group of women with disabilities, on multiple activities over an extended period. This is vastly different to typical approaches to consultation where women with disabilities are consulted individually, or briefly with a small group of women with disabilities they do not know. The Experts stress that such approaches can be tokenistic, and as one Expert stated, ***“Tokenism, or the illusion of being consulted, can be harmful. It does a lot of damage to self-esteem.”***

Another significant difference in this Experts Group is the ratio of staff to Experts. Unlike typical consultation or co-design processes, in this group there have consistently been more women with disabilities than staff. This helped to create a more equal balance of power.



## Personal impacts for the Experts Group

The Experts would like practitioners planning co-design or consultation with women with disabilities to understand the personal impacts that this project has had for them. The Experts have described their time in the Experts Group as “inspiring”, “validating” and “liberating”. They report having developed a strong rapport, sense of mutual support, resilience and collective safety, and as one Expert put it, ***“we have each other’s back.”***

One Expert described being part of the group as an ***“empowering experience, being able to share experiences without having to... explain ourselves, because the other Experts have been through similar circumstances.”*** Another Expert said, ***“I’ve been popping in and out of this group for various reasons over the last couple of years... Every time, I find it a very connected group. You don’t have to explain yourself, everyone gets it.”***

Experts described that they had been able to reflect on and reframe their individual experiences of gender inequality and ableism, to see these as social rather than personal issues. For one Expert, this process helped her ***“feel empowered to... be an advocate for the prevention of family violence... [this knowledge] is like a gem to me, it’s so precious.”***

Some Experts felt they had safely processed trauma and built confidence as part of a collective. One Expert stated that she had gained the ***“confidence to speak out and advocate for change so other marginalised women don’t experience similar barriers in the future”.***

Several Experts felt their lives had improved since joining the group. One Expert felt the group ***“propelled me into life... Doing Margins to the Mainstream, being part of a close group and seeing end results for the first time, gave me so much hope... I’m a different person now.”***

Many Experts are now accepting other opportunities to advocate publicly for the rights of women with disabilities, including women with disabilities who have survived violence. For each Expert, preventing violence against women with disabilities is firmly on their agenda.



# The multiple benefits of co-design and meaningful consultation

## Explaining the terms ‘co-design’ and ‘consultation’

Co-design and consultation are terms that are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are two distinct practices. Co-design is an iterative process where people with different knowledge, expertise and lived experiences work collaboratively to understand issues and develop solutions.<sup>2</sup> Co-design involves power-sharing, where people with lived experience are empowered to make project decisions and determine the project outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Consultation processes, on the other hand, are typically more narrowly framed and tend to be shorter than co-design. Often in consultation, an individual or group is asked to advise on an outcome or issue but does not have control over the decisions, direction or process.<sup>4</sup> Consultation processes rarely involve power-sharing around project decisions or direction. However, organisations can still make sure consultation is done meaningfully and with integrity, and this guide offers advice on how this can be done.

Where possible, this guide recommends best practice co-design with women with disabilities. However, it is acknowledged that consultation may be more appropriate in certain situations given the budget, resources, timeframe or nature of the policy, program and service. This guide can be applied to either approach. It offers recommendations that apply to conducting both co-design and meaningful consultation processes.



Figure 2: This illustration was designed to complement one of the messages co-designed by the Experts for the 16 Days of Activism Campaign: “Women with disabilities say equality is organisations valuing our lived expertise in co-design, consultation and advisory roles.”

## Benefits of co-design and meaningful consultation

Margins to the Mainstream Experts ask organisations to value “our lived expertise in co-design, consultation and advisory roles”. This message is represented in the illustration in Figure 2.<sup>1</sup> The Experts believe that when organisations centre the lived experience of women with disabilities in co-design and meaningful consultation, there can be many positive impacts.

Co-design and meaningful consultation processes require time and resources. However, doing this work well helps organisations to understand the experiences and requirements of women with disabilities. This knowledge can be used to develop services, policies or products that are relevant and responsive to the lives and interests of women with disabilities. In the words of one Expert, ***“As women with disability, we know what we need to create a positive outcome, and it makes sense to use that expertise.”***

Staff and organisations that aim to develop relevant and meaningful outcomes from the start, save time and money in the long run. Acting on the input of women with disabilities builds trust and strong relationships with this community. It also helps organisations dismantle, rather than unintentionally reproduce, sexist and ableist processes and outcomes.<sup>5</sup> As one Expert expressed, ***“It is good for us not only that we are involved, but also for the [organisations]... so that they do not make decisions that end up hurting us.”***

Co-design can also have positive personal impacts for women with disabilities. The Experts agree that they increased their self-confidence, resilience, skills and capabilities through engagement in Margins to the Mainstream’s multiple co-design processes.

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i This illustration and others featured are drawn from those used in social media tiles and other resources for the 16 Days of Activism Campaigns in 2021 and 2022.

## Principled co-design and the prevention of violence against women with disabilities

Principled co-design and consultation can also contribute to the prevention of violence against women with disabilities. Preventing this violence is critical, as women with disabilities experience violence at higher rates, and from a broader range of people, than men with disabilities or people without disabilities.<sup>6</sup>

To stop this violence before it starts, Margins to the Mainstream has demonstrated leading practice by addressing ableism and gender inequality in primary prevention activities.<sup>7</sup> The work of Margins to the Mainstream is consistent with Our Watch and Women with Disabilities Victoria's national resource to prevent violence against women and girls with disabilities, 'Changing the landscape'.<sup>8</sup>

'Changing the landscape' describes how gender inequality and ableism intersect and compound to drive high rates of violence against women with disabilities. It sets out the actions that society must take to prevent this violence, many of which are relevant to organisations and staff undertaking co-design and consultation. Relevant actions include:

- > Involving women with disabilities in the development of policies, projects or programs that are for or about them or intended to benefit everyone.
- > Creating genuine opportunities for women with disabilities to be consulted, express their own views, and make informed decisions about all aspects of their lives.
- > Including women with disabilities in social, economic, political and community life and addressing barriers to participation.
- > Challenging ableist and sexist stereotypes and assumptions.

Principled co-design and consultation can challenge harmful ableist and sexist stereotypes. These practices also provide opportunities for women with disabilities to exercise choice and autonomy and take part in society. Thus, beyond the positive implications for the issue at hand, these practices can contribute to the social change that is essential to prevent violence against women with disabilities.



# How this guide was designed

This resource was co-designed with the Margins to the Mainstream Experts Group in early 2023. This co-design process built on the skills, experience and earlier work of the Experts. This earlier work included workshops, consultations, advisory roles and events, where Experts advised on best practice when engaging women with disabilities in co-design and consultation.

Development of this guide started with an introductory meeting with the Experts, where the facilitator outlined the project aims, scope, timelines and opportunities for participation. The Experts were invited to participate in whatever way, and to whatever extent, best suited them. For each meeting and workshop, accessibility requirements were met, safety was prioritised, and the Experts were remunerated via an honorarium.

The facilitator conducted three half-day workshops and sent materials ahead of each session to guide discussion. Discussions centred on Experts' reflections about ethical and effective co-design practices with women with disabilities. Experts were invited to participate in an online evaluation after each workshop to provide feedback about the workshop and further information for the guide. Evaluation feedback shaped subsequent workshops and discussion questions.

Experts reported that the workshops were safe, accessible and inclusive. Experts reflected that receiving discussion questions in advance gave them time to reflect on what they wanted to contribute. As one Expert noted, *the questions “worked well because they were flexible and we were allowed to bring in different ideas too.”*

After the first two workshops, the facilitator identified and grouped the discussion themes. In workshop three, the Experts reviewed the themes and content to ensure these reflected their priorities for the guide.

Experts had two opportunities to review drafts of this guide. Experts could provide feedback in any format. The facilitator then presented the draft guide in a meeting with the Experts and provided an opportunity for verbal feedback. The Experts were then consulted in the graphic design process for the guide.

# Eight essential practices for co-design and meaningful consultation with women with disabilities

The Margins to the Mainstream Experts have collectively determined what they consider to be the most important practices for ethical and effective co-design and consultation with women with disabilities.

These eight essential practices require staff and organisations to do things differently to the usual ways of working and to co-create with women with disabilities in meaningful and principled ways.

It is important to take action in each of these eight practice areas. Some practices can be implemented quickly, while others will develop and become more embedded over time. Together, these eight practices set the foundations for high quality, respectful co-design and consultation with women with disabilities.

## Eight essential practices

- 1** Establish safe spaces and processes, online and in-person.
- 2** Create accessible co-design spaces and practices.
- 3** Foster inclusive co-design environments and processes.
- 4** Embed honesty, transparency and trust in all co-design practices.
- 5** Practice respect across all aspects of co-design with women with disabilities.
- 6** Enable women with disabilities to lead co-design processes.
- 7** Build staff capability and a supportive organisational environment for undertaking principled, effective co-design.
- 8** Allow sufficient time for high-quality co-design processes.

# 1 Establish safe spaces and processes, online and in-person

The physical and emotional safety of women with disabilities must be upheld throughout the entire process of co-design or consultation.<sup>9</sup> For women with disabilities, different or additional safety considerations might be necessary. This is because women with disabilities are more likely to have experienced violence, abuse and trauma.<sup>10</sup> Women with disabilities can also experience visible and invisible barriers to safety and support. Further, they can experience discrimination, disadvantage and other impacts of gender inequality and ableism.<sup>11</sup>

As one Expert explained, *“establishing safety is not about wrapping (a woman with disability) up in bubble wrap.”* It is about being considerate of the diverse circumstances and lived experiences that women with disabilities bring to the table. It involves asking about and meeting a range of safety requirements.

Organisations must establish safety from the initial scoping and planning process. Safety must be prioritised in all processes and practices. The lives and requirements of women with disabilities are not static, so it is important to revisit safety throughout the process.

Safety requires organisations to create inclusive, trusting environments where women with disabilities can participate in ways and to the extent that works for them. For the Margins to the Mainstream Experts, safety means upholding confidentiality, privacy, transparency, honesty and trust, which creates safe foundations for ethical co-design and consultation.

## Safety through peer support

The Experts have worked closely together across all Margins to the Mainstream activities, both as a whole group and in smaller groups. As a result, the Experts feel that they have developed close bonds and working relationships. They feel that their ability to provide each other with support and security is strong. This mutual support within the group helped the Experts establish a sense of safety.

For organisations or staff commencing consultation or co-design processes without an established Experts Group, there are a range of opportunities for peer support. Ways to enable peer support include:

- > Create opportunities for several women with disabilities to be involved in ongoing advisory, consultation and co-design processes. Provide opportunities for the women to get to know each other beyond the context of the project.
- > Invite multiple women with disabilities to participate in a co-design or consultation process, or to present at an event.
- > Avoid only inviting one woman with disability to participate in a consultation. This can feel tokenistic. It can also put pressure on the woman with disability to speak on behalf of all women with disabilities. Women with disabilities are a diverse group. The idea that one woman with disability can speak on behalf of all others is an ableist assumption.

**“If the environment feels unsafe, it makes it very hard to discuss lived experience openly. If it’s unsafe, then you feel distressed about what you’ve already shared.”**

Expert<sup>12</sup>

## Practical measures to establish safety in co-design and consultation

- > Ask the question: “What are the ways that we can uphold your safety, privacy and confidentiality?”
- > Be aware that safety requirements can change over time for a variety of reasons, so safety measures should be periodically reviewed.
- > Respect that, for many reasons, women with disabilities might not want to discuss their lived experience. Respecting individual boundaries is critical to establish trust and safety.
- > Minimise the risk of re-traumatisation for each woman with disability - remind women that they can opt out of any part of a discussion that they might find sensitive.
- > Provide trigger warnings, and contact details for supports and services, at the start of sessions and in follow-up communications. Check in with group members after and between sessions.
- > Support women with disabilities to make decisions about what they share of their own experiences of violence, abuse, discrimination, disadvantage or other traumas depending on the audience, context or activity. This supports women with disabilities to make decisions that prioritise their self-care.
- > Facilitate soft referral processes for specialist services and support at the request of women with disabilities.
- > Ensure women with disabilities are familiar and comfortable with the physical environment. This includes knowing where the entrances, exits, bathrooms and other facilities are, and being free to leave a room or building when they want to. Be familiar with the physical location to answer any questions that arise.
- > Be mindful that women with disabilities can experience different, or additional, safety risks in online consultations. Risks may relate to current or historical experiences of violence or control, including that which is perpetrated by a support worker or unpaid carer.
- > Protect the privacy and confidentiality of women with disabilities. For instance, make sure email addresses are not visible in group emails. Always ask for permission before sharing personal information or details of a woman’s lived experience.
- > Ascertain the gender of facilitators and other people involved in activities, such as support staff and contractors. Consider whether this may impact the involvement or sense of safety of the women with disabilities involved in the process. If in doubt, ask.

## 2 Create accessible co-design spaces and practices

Consultation and co-design processes must be accessible to enable the full and equal participation of women with disabilities. There are many types of barriers that restrict equal participation in co-design and consultation. As one Expert said, *“We all have different experiences and different kinds of disability. We would like people to ask us what kind of support we need [as individuals] and get to know us... It helps us to deliver our messages.”*

The types of barriers that can restrict participation include:

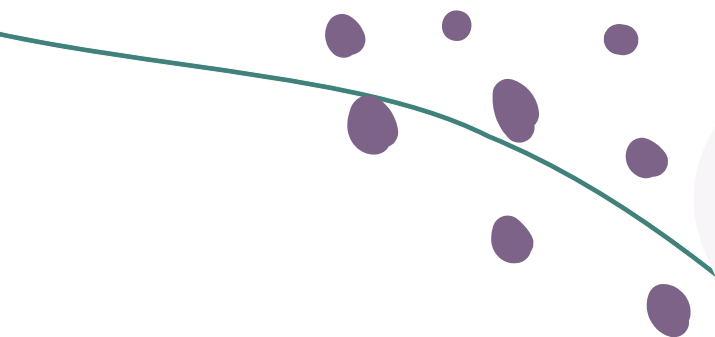
- > Physical barriers, such as poor lighting that impacts the ability of women with low vision to see.
- > Communication barriers, such as workshops conducted without Auslan interpreting, hearing loops or live captions for women with hearing impairment.
- > Attitudinal barriers, such as negative assumptions held by staff or others about the ability of women with disabilities to participate in co-design.
- > Structural barriers, such as gaps in disability funding that limit women with disabilities’ access to assistive technology.<sup>13</sup>

Further, women with disabilities can have employment, study, caring responsibilities, health concerns or other commitments that can affect their involvement.

To improve accessibility practices, Margins to the Mainstream Experts urge organisations and their staff to:

- > Embed accessibility from the very start of a co-design or consultation process.
- > As a standard practice, ask about accessibility requirements when inviting anyone to join a co-design or consultation process.
- > Ask each woman with disability about their specific access and support requirements so that they can participate in ways that work best for them. Avoid making assumptions based on a woman’s diagnosis or disability.
- > Be aware that access and support requirements can change over time.
- > Enquire about women with disabilities’ access and support requirements privately. This can be more comfortable than discussing their requirements in a group. Actively listen when women with disabilities tell you about their accessibility requirements and believe what they tell you. One Expert explained, *“It’s important to believe people if you want to establish trust.”*
- > Address barriers related to invisible disabilities, such as those related to chronic pain, psychosocial disabilities, or neurodivergence.





**“Women with disabilities have different needs and requirements. Ask each one of us what we need and when we need it to happen.”**

Expert

- > If a woman with disability is bringing a support person with them, find out what role they want the support person to play.
- > Ask women with disabilities for feedback on how to improve your organisation’s accessibility practices.
- > Use an accessibility auditing tool, such as Women with Disabilities Victoria’s [Women’s Health Services Disability Audit Toolkit](#). This toolkit contains self-assessment audits and advice on accessibility improvements.
- > Set aside a reasonable budget for accessibility requirements so that women with disabilities are not excluded from participating.
- > Provide relevant documents ahead of time in suitable formats and remember that suitable formats will vary between individuals.
- > Communicate clearly and succinctly. Minimise jargon and use friendly and respectful language and tones in written and verbal communication.<sup>i</sup>
- > Allow for breaks and provide opportunities for sensory relief.
- > Keep in mind that in on-line environments, women with disabilities may prefer to participate with cameras off, via the chat function, or verbally at different times.
- > Choose accessible physical locations for in-person activities. Equip staff with information about accessibility features. For instance, prepare staff to answer questions about whether the building has steps, elevators, accessible bathrooms or whether the hallway is wide enough for mobility devices.
- > Address accessibility issues related to transport that may limit participation. For instance, cover taxi costs up front rather than through reimbursements.

It takes more than addressing accessibility requirements to develop inclusive practices. Inclusive environments and processes are those where women with disabilities can participate fully and equitably and feel welcomed and encouraged to do so.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> For information about inclusive language about disability, refer to [People with Disability Australia’s Language Guide: A guide to language about disability](#).

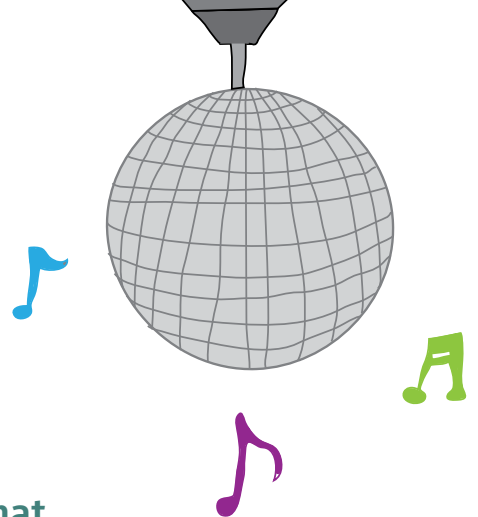
# 3 Foster inclusive co-design environments and processes

Figure 3 is an illustration developed for the 2022 ‘16 Days of Activism’ campaign, to reinforce the Experts’ message: “Equality is asking us to dance, not just inviting us to the party. We are not limited by gender and disability stereotypes!”

The Experts explain that in the context of co-design and consultation, this message highlights the importance of inclusive consultation practices. One Expert stated, **“Don’t just get us in the room, really engage with us and put effort into welcoming us... and hearing from us. Prioritise that.”**



Figure 3: Illustration to accompany the message: “women with disabilities say equality is asking us to dance, not just inviting us to the party. We are not limited by gender and disability stereotypes.”

A decorative graphic in the top right corner featuring a grey wireframe globe hanging from a grey funnel-like shape. Three musical notes are scattered around the globe: a blue one to the left, a purple one below, and a green one to the right.

**“Although the barriers we face may differ, the discrimination and ableism we experience are the same. The Experts Group is a shining example of what women with disability can achieve when [they are] supported and have their access requirements met.”**

## Expert

The Margins to the Mainstream Experts offer the following guidance for organisations and staff who want to create inclusive co-design and consultation environments:

- > Recognise and respect the diversity of women with disabilities, remembering women with disabilities have different backgrounds, lived experiences and perspectives.
- > Make sure that a diverse representation of women with disabilities are welcome and encouraged to participate. This will help to ensure your work meets the needs of a broad range of women with disabilities. For instance, invite women with different disabilities, including invisible and psychosocial disabilities, and women of different ages, sexualities, races and religions to participate.
- > Create spaces that are free from discrimination and disrespect.<sup>i</sup> Discrimination and disrespect limit the effective and equal participation of women with disabilities and cause harm to the women involved.
- > Focus on each woman’s strengths and enable each woman to contribute in whatever way feels most comfortable to them. Ask about each woman’s learning, working or communication style and preferred ways to receive information.
- > Support flexible participation. Understand that ability and availability to take part in activities can change over time. Enable women with disabilities to take breaks, pass on discussion topics and exit and enter meetings as needed. Provide the freedom to exit and re-join co-design processes if required.

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<sup>i</sup> Refer to Practice 7 for guidance on how organisations can create spaces free from discrimination.

# 4 Embed honesty, transparency and trust in all co-design practices

Margins to the Mainstream Experts ask organisations to prioritise honesty, transparency and trust in co-design and consultation. Without these values, consultation and co-design can be unsafe, disempowering and harmful for women with disabilities, which hinders their participation. One Expert explained, *“you need a trusting space to be able to speak”*.

Transparency is necessary across all aspects of co-design. This includes the aims and objectives, scope for action, and the degree of influence the co-design or consultation process will have over the outcome.<sup>15</sup> One Expert stated, *“When there is no direction or clarity, it makes people unprepared and unsafe.”*

Transparency around the expected role and input of women with disabilities is critical. The Experts ask organisations to articulate clearly:

- > timelines of the project and the expected time commitment of those involved
- > unanticipated changes to timelines, scope or time commitment that arise over the duration of the project
- > the process in which you are asking women with disabilities to participate
- > preferences or expectations around the contributions of women with disabilities
- > what the potential outcomes or outputs of the work will be
- > the level of influence women with disabilities can expect to have over the outcomes.

Many Experts reported that outside Margins to the Mainstream activities, they had experienced dishonesty in co-design and consultation processes. One common area of dishonesty was around remuneration. One Expert explained that what *“happens quite frequently is being lied to about the amount and the type of honorarium”*. The Experts report that this is unethical, dishonest and disrespectful. This dishonesty makes them *“feel used”*, particularly *“after sharing personal lived experiences for hours with other people”*.



Figure 4: This illustration was designed to complement one of the messages co-designed by the Experts for the 16 Days of Activism Campaign: “women with disabilities say equality is having allies who work alongside women with disabilities to take action against sexism and ableism.”

Margins to the Mainstream Experts ask organisations and staff to be clear from the start about whether there is the budget or intention to remunerate women with disabilities for their contributions, and if so, to specify the amount and form of payment offered. Experts also advise organisations to ask each woman with disability about their individual remuneration preferences. Some women appreciate payment in different forms, such as vouchers for different products or services, physical vouchers or e-gift cards, or honorariums via bank transfers.

Finally, be transparent about how the contributions of women with disabilities will be used and shared. Women with disability should have ownership over their lived experiences. This means that when a woman’s lived experience or personal information is included in an outcome or product, ensure that the woman can review, request changes and agree to the final product. Women with disabilities should have the genuine opportunity to ensure they are satisfied that their experiences are reflected accurately, appropriately and safely.

# 5 Practice respect across all aspects of co-design with women with disabilities

The Margins to the Mainstream Experts stress that respect and authenticity are essential in any co-design or consultation process. This is consistent with ‘Changing the landscape’, which describes the importance of organisations practicing respectful co-design by sharing decision-making power and building equal working relationships with women with disabilities.<sup>16</sup>

The Margins to the Mainstream Experts outline several critical steps that organisations can take to create respectful co-design and consultation processes. These include:

- > Establish co-design and consultation as a genuine, rather than token exercise. This means that organisations must be willing to take action based on the outcomes of a co-design or consultation process. Women with disabilities want to be confident that their input will result in improvements for themselves and others.
- > Evaluate and learn from co-design and consultation processes. Commit to improving processes in the future.
- > Communicate project updates and outcomes to women with disabilities, during and after the co-design process. Women with disabilities want to be informed about the end results and the impacts of their contributions.
- > Provide genuine opportunities for women with disabilities to participate in decision-making around the process, outputs and outcomes.
- > Remunerate women with disabilities fairly for their time and contributions. This helps to show that organisations respect and value their efforts.
- > Communicate openly and respectfully. Actively listen to and engage with women with disabilities. Recognise and value their lived experience and knowledge.
- > Have trust and confidence in, and appreciate, the contributions of women with disabilities.
- > Provide feedback on reasons why some inputs and suggestions are not included in the final product.
- > Be empathetic, not sympathetic. As one Expert said, ***“don’t put on a performance to demonstrate empathy that is not genuine.”***

**“We want to know if any changes to services have been made? Any systemic changes? It makes the past bearable if we know others do not have to go through what we went through. Has the co-design process made a difference?”**

**Expert**

*Figure 5: Illustration to accompany the Experts' message: "women with disabilities say: equality is the right to make my own choices and decisions."*



# 6 Enable women with disabilities to lead co-design processes

The best way to ensure that projects, policies and initiatives are relevant to women with disabilities is for the work to be created by them, not for them. This means involving women with disabilities in design, delivery, decision-making and leadership from the start and throughout the entire co-design process.<sup>17</sup> It means centring the knowledge, expertise, strengths and lived experiences of women with disabilities.

For the Experts, respecting the right of women with disabilities to make decisions is a marker of equality that is fundamental to co-design. This idea is expressed in the message, “women with disabilities say equality is the right to make my own choices and decisions” and the illustration in Figure 8.

So that women with disabilities can lead co-design work, the Experts ask organisations to:

- > Enable women with disabilities to make informed and meaningful project decisions from the start and throughout the entire project.
- > Create co-design spaces that encourage open discussions and idea sharing. Avoid setting rigid agendas that limit the ability of women with disabilities to contribute.
- > Do not make assumptions about what women with disabilities need or want. As one Expert explained ***“It’s better to have people with lived experience of disability speak for themselves.”***
- > Allocate time and resources for women with disabilities to develop any skills or knowledge that can support them to meaningfully participate in the co-design process, considering both individual and group interests.

**“Enable Experts to make decisions from the start, to the middle, to the end.”**

Expert



## Strengths-based approaches

Strength-based approaches where women with disabilities draw on their abilities, collective wisdom and resilience, can support women to build ownership in co-design. One Expert explained that such an approach centres ***“not only your own strength, but that strength that you will draw, or that you create together when you’re working in that group environment.”***

To establish strengths-based co-design practices, the Experts encourage organisations to:

- > Respect women with disabilities as experts who are capable of making decisions and have important insights and skills to contribute. Trust and value their inputs.
- > Offer opportunities for collaboration with other women with disabilities, as collaboration can be a source of strength, support, safety and belonging.
- > Ask questions about support requirements in positive ways, such as “What type of support helps you to do your best work?”



# 7 Build staff capability and a supportive organisational environment for undertaking principled, effective co-design

Principled co-design and consultation with women with disabilities require staff with specific skills, experience and understanding.<sup>18</sup> Workplaces need to provide learning and support opportunities for staff to build these competencies. This includes the skills to:

- > Actively listen, build rapport and be flexible and responsive.
- > Centre, value and believe women with disabilities.
- > Create or advocate for the changes women with disabilities identify as important.
- > Centre the voices of women with disabilities when liaising with support people, paid carers, and other important people in their lives.
- > Recognise that as women with disabilities experience high rates of violence, those involved in co-design projects are more likely to have lived experience of violence.<sup>i</sup>
- > Practice in trauma-informed ways that recognise and respect each woman's boundaries. Ensure women with disabilities are clear they have control over whether - and how much - information they share about difficult and traumatic experiences.

Spaces and processes must be free from discrimination for women with disabilities to feel safe and welcome to participate. To achieve this, staff and organisations need the skills to:

- > Understand how sexism, ableism and other forms of discrimination operate across individual, community, structural and societal levels.
- > Practice self-awareness and reflect on their own biases and assumptions.
- > Address barriers to participation that stem from discrimination.
- > Challenge ableist and sexist behaviour in co-design and consultation, organisational practices and among colleagues. The Experts agree, as shown in Figure 9, that having allies to challenge these behaviours supports equality for women with disabilities.

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<sup>i</sup> The Experts noted some women with disabilities may not initially frame their experiences as violence or abuse. Staff should respect that for women with disabilities, the process of recognising their own experiences as violence or abuse can be difficult. However, the Experts felt this was a useful process to understand how gender inequality and ableism have impacted their lived experiences.



Figure 6: illustration designed to accompany the Experts' message: "women with disabilities say: equality is having allies who challenge sexist and ableist behaviour."

**"Staff need the skills to support Experts to develop skills and confidence to show their strength. They need skills to support Experts to build capabilities."**

Expert

**"Staff should operate with the idea we can all come together [as equals around a common objective]. Learn and accept that you are going to make mistakes."**

Expert

Training can help staff to build their understanding of different forms of discrimination. To reduce the risk of unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes, choose training designed and delivered by women with disabilities and specialist gender and disability organisations.

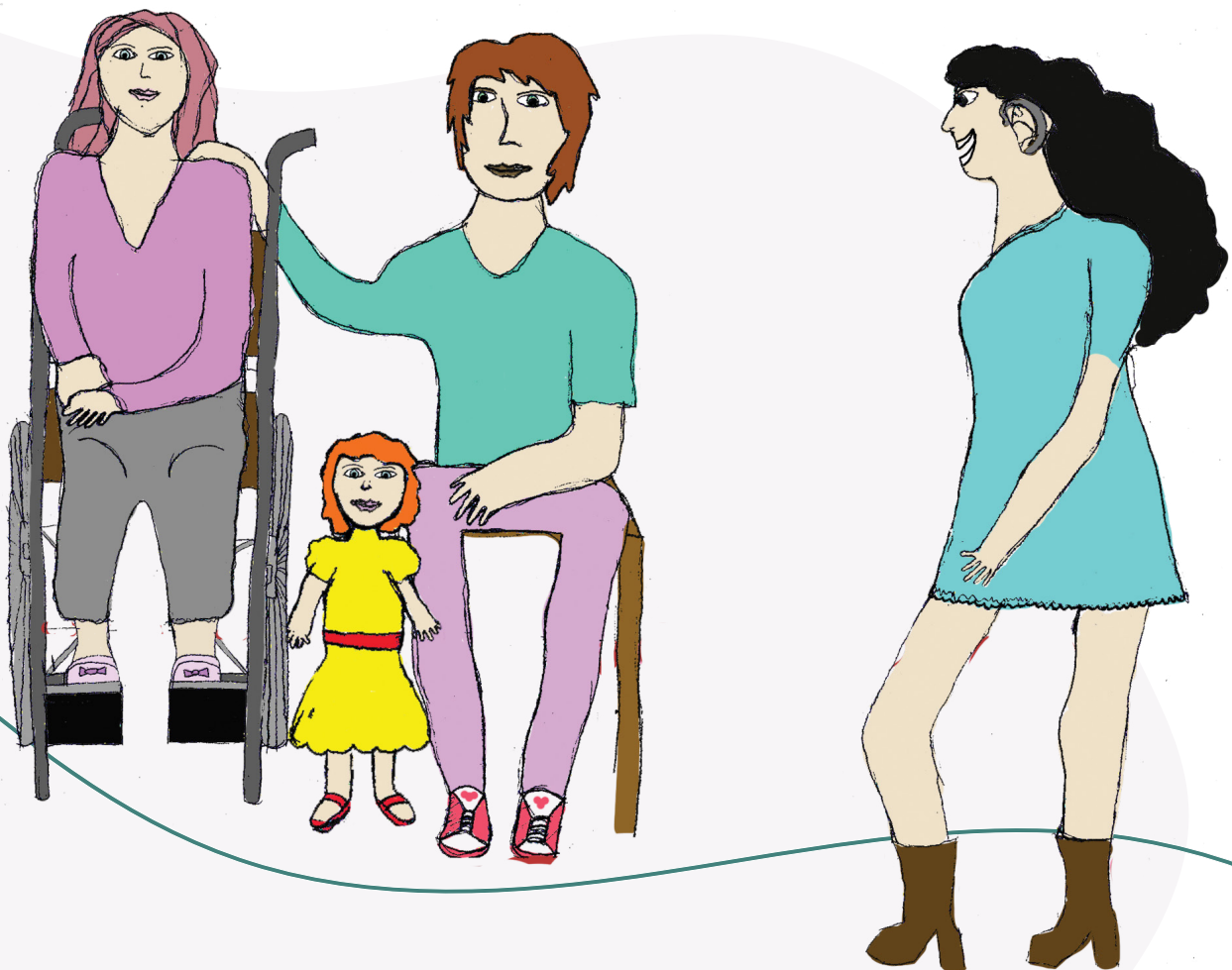
Supportive organisational cultures and enabling environments are necessary for ethical co-design and consultation. Organisations need to allocate sufficient budget, time and staff resources to ensure staff, facilitators and women with disabilities can do their best work.


# 8 Allow sufficient time for high-quality co-design processes

Time is a critical enabler of principled and effective co-design and consultation.<sup>19</sup> Project timelines should be sufficient for co-design to be accessible, effective and authentic.<sup>20</sup>

The Experts believe it is important for organisations and their staff to understand that co-design is not a linear process. Staff and facilitators need time to facilitate an iterative process that prioritises the collective expression and exploration of ideas. Time is necessary to enable those participating to understand the issue or project at hand, grapple with relevant concepts and go back and forth while designing outcomes. The Experts report that these iterative processes are restricted by compressed or rigid timetables.

The Experts also stress that ethical and effective co-design and consultation processes require more than a one-off consultation. Everyone needs time to establish rapport and relationships, build understanding, and explore ideas and solutions.





**“I’ve really felt listened to in this group [Margins to the Mainstream]. With other experiences of groups, things have been brought to us just the one time, and it’s been called co-design. But that’s not co-design. Co-design is going back and forth.”**

Expert<sup>21</sup>

The Margins to the Mainstream Experts agree that appropriate timelines are also critical for the following reasons:

- > Organisations need sufficient time to centre lived experience and enable genuine opportunities for women with disabilities to contribute to decision-making and design.
- > Women with disabilities need enough time to prepare for consultation, for instance, to read relevant materials or reflect on what discussion points they would like to contribute.
- > Women with disabilities have different accessibility and support requirements, and different learning and engagement styles. Sufficient time is needed to accommodate accessibility and support requirements, such as interpreting, and to ensure each person can prepare and contribute in their preferred ways.
- > In interviews, workshops or co-design activities, each person involved needs to have time to contribute. Outside of the Margins to the Mainstream Experts Group, the Experts report consultation experiences that were too short, rushed or a one-off activity, which did not allow them the opportunity to fully contribute.

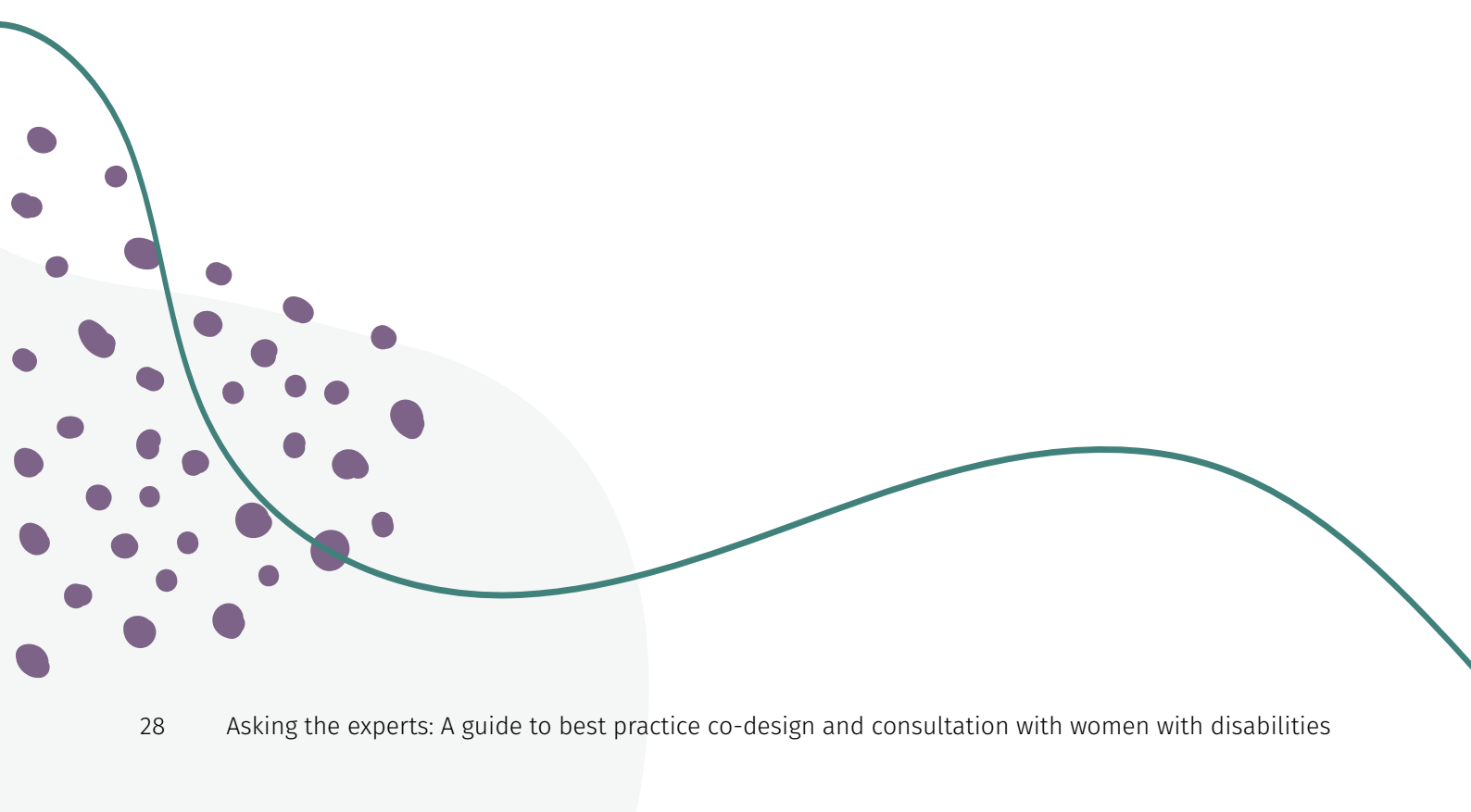
# Final thoughts

This guide provides advice on how to undertake co-design and consultation with women with disabilities in ethical and effective ways. This guidance comes directly from the Margins to the Mainstream Experts. The Experts have drawn on their lived experience, skills, knowledge, and many varied experiences in co-design and consultation, to establish this set of practices. These eight practices set the foundations for organisations and staff to conduct principled co-design and consultation work with women with disabilities.

Organisations can establish strong and rewarding co-design processes with women with disabilities. This can be done by establishing safe, accessible and inclusive spaces and processes; practising transparency and respect; enabling women with disabilities to lead processes and centring their lived experiences; building staff capabilities and supportive organisational environments; and allowing sufficient time.

Embedding these eight practices in your organisation's co-design and consultation work can have significant benefits. Organisations can develop accessible, inclusive and sustainable policies, programs, services and products that meet the needs and promote the rights of women with disabilities from the start. Consequently, organisations can save time and resources overall. Organisations can also better support women with disabilities to build their confidence and resilience and exercise choice, control and autonomy.

Organisations that put this guide into practice are contributing to broader social change. When organisations promote the ability of women with disabilities to make informed decisions and participate equitably in society, they challenge the negative stereotypes and controlling and exclusionary practices that drive violence against women with disabilities. By promoting gender and disability equality, principled co-design and consultation can contribute to the social change that is essential to prevent violence against women with disabilities before it starts.



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