



# Conversation Starter

Equality and respect for  
women with disabilities

16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence



## Why we developed this conversation starter

The [Together For Equality and Respect](#) partnership in Melbourne's east are promoting conversations focusing on action for equality and respect for all women, as part of the global [16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence](#).

This conversation starter draws on the work undertaken by the Experts Group, women with disabilities at the core of the project [Margins to Mainstream: Preventing violence against women with disabilities](#).

Gender inequality and disrespect are the underlying social causes of violence against women. The risk of this violence is increased for groups of women who experience other forms of discrimination, including women with disabilities, older women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women from migrant and refugee communities.

This conversation starter focuses on equality and respect for women with disabilities. You can find the other resources on the [website](#).

We encourage organisations and staff, community groups and families to use these resources to have conversations about equality and respect during the 16 Days of Activism.

Here are some ideas to get you started

- Add a question in a meeting and ask everyone to answer for themselves. Then end with a reflection on learnings or a follow up action.
- Organise an event for your workplace or community group: you might create an artwork in response to the messages and questions, show a video or use a resource to get others involved.
- Whatever you do, take a photo and share it (with consent). This inspires others and draws attention to the importance of us all joining in the work to stop violence before it starts.

# Why we need to promote equality and respect for women with disabilities

About one in five women in Australia have a disability.

Women with disabilities experience violence, abuse and neglect at much higher rates, over longer periods of time, from a wider range of perpetrators and in more settings than women without disabilities or men with disabilities.

The violence experienced by women with disabilities is prevalent and serious.

It is also preventable. To stop violence against women with disabilities before it starts, we need to address gender inequality and ableism as the factors that lead to this violence and enable it to continue.

Discrimination due to ableism and sexism limits the human rights of women with disabilities. This includes limiting their access to quality services, participation in education, employment, economic independence, freedom of movement and participation in their communities and society at large.

## Definitions

- **Gender equality:** the equal distribution of rights, opportunities, resources, responsibilities and outcomes between people of different genders.<sup>1</sup> Gender equality does not mean erasing gender differences, but that people's rights, responsibilities and opportunities are not dependent on their gender.<sup>2</sup>
- **Ableism:** the assumptions and behaviours that people without disabilities are better than people with disabilities, leading to discrimination, disadvantage and violence.  
  
Together, gender inequality and ableism increase the disadvantages that women and non-binary people with disabilities experience. Gender inequality and ableism together drive the violence against women with disabilities, together with other forms of discrimination.
- **Women with disabilities:** people who identify as women and who identify as having disabilities. This can include, but it is not limited to, physical, cognitive, sensory and psychosocial impairments, neurodivergence and chronic illness.

# Messages from women with disabilities in Melbourne's east

**Women with disabilities are diverse and have different accessibility requirements. Ask each of us what we need to contribute in ways that are right for us as individuals. This includes feeling safe, having the accessibility and other supports needed and an inclusive environment for all.**

**Value the contributions of women with disabilities in your organisation, as staff, as volunteers, as community representatives on advisory committees or Board members. Does your organisation have policies, procedures and a workplace culture that facilitates opportunities for women with disabilities and provides reasonable adjustments and accessibility supports in their roles?**

**Listen and learn from women with disabilities about our experiences and how we want to be treated. Respect what women with disabilities have to say.**

**Educate yourself about ableism. Reflect on how gender and ableist stereotypes may be expressed in everyday comments or assumptions about women with disabilities.**

**Have conversations with your family, friends and workplace colleagues to challenge gender and disability stereotypes.**

**Stand alongside women with disabilities to speak out for our rights. Get involved with activism and causes relating to women with disabilities.**

**As women with disabilities, our lived experience of sexism and ableism matters. Some of us bring experiences of family violence, and compounding discrimination as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, older women, refugee and migrant women.**

**It makes a difference to have allies, who can support our advocacy and perspectives as women with disabilities in the workplace, on committees, or in public places.**

**Draw on the expertise of women with disabilities and specialist gender and disability organisations, such as Women with Disabilities Victoria, to train your staff and support staff in facilitating consultation and co-design processes with women with disabilities.**

**We are 'Experts' because we are passionate and motivated to work for social change, to use our lived experiences to prevent violence, abuse and discrimination against women with disabilities before it starts.**

**If you witness ableist and sexist behaviour, take action: call out discrimination and unacceptable behaviour in both public or private life, when it happens or follow up later; check in with the person who was targeted.**

**Encourage women with disabilities to take on leadership positions in community groups, workplaces and in public life**

# Questions to start conversations

- Consider how women with disabilities are depicted in advertising, films and television, popular culture:
  - Are there common stereotypes, themes or representations?
  - What messages do they send to women with disabilities about how they are viewed?
  - How do these representations compare to how women with disabilities are portrayed in our organisation's publications and materials?
  - What can I/we do to challenge stereotypes and better represent the diversity and achievements of women with disabilities?
- What can we do to more strongly act as allies for women with disabilities? Consider for example planning ways to respond as allies when we hear negative or belittling comments, or "jokes" about women with disabilities in the future.
- In our team, organisation or service, how are we reaching out to women with disabilities and learning from their experiences, needs and challenges in service planning and delivery?
- To what extent are women with disabilities present in our organisation/team or service as paid staff, in our advisory structures, and in consultations and co-design projects?
- How can we strengthen how we celebrate and show respect to women with disabilities in our life and community?



# Resources to support conversations

## Websites

[Margins to Mainstream: Preventing violence against women with disabilities](#). This website from the project led by Women's Health East in partnership with Women with Disabilities Victoria and the *Together For Equality & Respect* partnership provides multiple unique and valuable resources co-designed by women with disabilities.

## Videos

[Human Rights Model of Disability - Featuring Ellie the Equality Emu](#). A short animated video produced by The Disability Advocacy Resource Unit (DARU) outlining the medical, charity, social and human rights models of disability.

["Equality Is..."](#). A set of documentary videos featuring members of the Margins to the Mainstream Experts Group discussing their lived experiences and their calls to action.

## Acknowledgements

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Women's Health East has been funded under Respect Victoria's 16 Days of Activism grassroots initiative. This has contributed to the development of resources and activities undertaken in Melbourne's east by the Together For Equality and Respect partner organisations and communities. The resources are available at [whe.org.au/tfer/16-days/](http://whe.org.au/tfer/16-days/)

## Text based resources

[We are the Experts: working together with women with disabilities in advisory committees, consultation and co-design](#). A guide developed through Margins to the Mainstream: Preventing violence against women with disabilities for women with disabilities.

[Asking the Experts: a guide to best practice co-design and consultation with women with disabilities](#). A guide developed through Margins to the Mainstream: Preventing violence against women with disabilities for workers.

[2019 '16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence' campaign - Women with Disabilities Victoria](#). A resource by Women with Disabilities Victoria addressing the common microaggressions and disrespectful behaviour experienced by women with disabilities in their social media campaign.

[12 Principles of Respectful Communication with Women with Disabilities](#). Women with Disabilities Victoria's guide to improving day to day interactions.

[Taking action as an ally for women with disabilities](#). A series of brief conversation guides co-designed by the Margins to the Mainstream Experts to promote workplace and community conversations to take action on gender and disability stereotypes and inequalities.

[Changing the Landscape – Summary](#). The evidence based framework produced by Women with Disabilities Victoria and Our Watch in 2022 which guides prevention of violence against women with disabilities.

[Framework for action to prevent violence against women with disabilities. A resource for governments and policy makers](#). A resource developed by Our Watch and Women with Disabilities Victoria.

## References

1. [Gender Equality Act 2020](#) (Victoria).
2. Department of Premier and Cabinet 2017, '[Free from violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women](#)' Victorian Government.

