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Brief about Women with Disabilities ACT's new research report *Involved from the Beginning: using COVID-19 experiences to plan a better future for women\* with disabilities in the ACT*

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## Background

Prior to the COVID-19 emergency, women, girls, feminine identifying, and non-binary people (hereby referred to as women\*) with disabilities in Australia faced systemic marginalisation.<sup>1</sup> Research demonstrates that disasters are profoundly discriminatory and exacerbate pre-existing disadvantages.<sup>2</sup> It was therefore inevitable that COVID-19 was going to intensify the systemic marginalisation of women\* with disabilities in the ACT. In 2020, Women with Disabilities ACT conducted a survey that showed women\* with disabilities in the ACT were being left behind during COVID. This project follows on from WWDACT's initial report 'The Responsibility has Fallen on Us'.<sup>3</sup> It responds to the ongoing pandemic, growing international and national literature, and a need for a more nuanced understanding of how COVID-19 impacted people facing both gendered and disability discrimination and disadvantage.

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women. *The Empowerment of Women and Girls with Disabilities: Towards Full and Effective Participation and Gender Equality*. New York: UN Women, 2018. Accessed 8 September, 2021. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2018/empowerment-of-women-and-girls-with-disabilities-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3504>

<sup>2</sup> Victorian Council of Social Services. *Disaster and disadvantage: Social vulnerability in emergency management*. Victorian Council of Social Services: Victoria, 2014. Accessed 12 October 2021. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2014-06/apo-nid40069.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Women with Disabilities ACT. *'The Responsibility has Fallen on us' Perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on Women\* and Girls with Disabilities in the ACT and Region*. Canberra, 2020. Accessed 12 July 2021. <https://d35ohva3c1yycw.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/06110218/WWDACT-Covid-19-Report-FINAL2.pdf>

## Recommendations

1. Women with Disabilities ACT to work with the ACT Government and relevant stakeholders to urgently address prevailing inequality and disadvantage experienced by women\* with disabilities.
2. Women with Disabilities ACT to work with the ACT Government and necessary stakeholders to ensure women\* with disabilities are considered as a distinct cohort in all future emergency planning.
3. Women with Disabilities ACT to work with the ACT Government to ensure a diversity of women\* (e.g. LGBTIQ, CALD & multicultural & Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) with disabilities are included in ongoing and future emergency planning.
4. ACT Government to work with disability services and the community sector to adequately plan for a surge workforce of support workers during emergencies. This must provide access to in home support.
5. ACT Government to work with relevant stakeholders to plan for a surge workforce of mental health workers during emergencies. This must include mental health practitioners experienced in disability, as well as LGBTIQ+ specific services.
6. ACT Government and Domestic Violence Crisis Services (DVCS) to work with WWDACT to produce disability specific messaging regarding violence against women\* with disabilities. This must include broader definitions of both 'domestic' and 'violence' to include carer abuse and institutional violence.
7. ACT Government to support DVCS and relevant stakeholders to urgently create more accessible support services for women\* with disabilities.
8. ACT Government to work with relevant stakeholders to maintain the availability of Telehealth after the pandemic.
9. ACT Government and WorkSafe ACT to better communicate employer obligations regarding provisions for flexible work arrangements. This may include reassessing guidelines to be more straight forward and involve less disclosure of medical information. Flexible work arrangements should be available to all employees on request (where appropriate) so that women\* with disabilities are not set apart from their colleagues.

## Survey

An online survey was conducted from 11<sup>th</sup> May 2021 – 25<sup>th</sup> July 2021 to consult with women\* with disabilities in the ACT. Ninety-two eligible responses were collected.

The survey sought to understand:

- How COVID-19 impacted on the physical and mental health of women\* with disabilities?
- How did COVID-19 impact pre-existing gender Inequalities?
- Did women\* with disabilities have sufficient access to government relief during the height of the pandemic and recovery period?
- Did experiences of domestic and family violence change for women\* with disabilities during COVID-19?

## Demographic Overview

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 8.70% aged 18-24</li><li>• 21.74% aged 25-34</li><li>• 26.09% aged 35-44</li><li>• 20.65% aged 45-54</li><li>• 16.30% aged 55-64</li><li>• 6.52% aged 65+</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 25% of respondents identified as LGBTIQ+</li><li>• 14.13% of respondents identified as gender diverse</li><li>• 2.17% of respondents identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Island</li><li>• 4.35% of respondents identified as persons of colour or ethnically diverse.</li></ul> |
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## Mental and Physical Wellbeing

Surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of statistics showed that around one in five Australians (20%) experienced high or very high levels of psychological distress in June 2021, March 2021 (20%) and November 2020 (21%).

**78% of women\* with disability in the ACT reported experiencing new or increased mental health issues because of COVID-19.**

In addition:

- 87% of LGBTIQ+ people with disability experienced new or increased mental health issues because of COVID-19 compared to 71% of non-LGBTIQ+ women with disability.
- Employment status prior to COVID-19 was not a predictor of mental health outcomes for women\* with disability.
- 28% of women with disability were impacted negatively by increased physical labour during COVID-19. (e.g. increase in household chores, decrease in usual support)

### **Respite and Recovery Period<sup>4</sup>**

While COVID-19 has on balance been a negative experience for women\* with disabilities in the ACT, there have been positive changes to community structures and interactions.

**Positive changes included: increased social security payments; increased availability of Telehealth appointments; the normalisation of video calls; the ability to work from home; and a greater community awareness of infection control, isolation, and loneliness.**

- 75% of respondents experienced positive social changes.
- Preserving these positive impacts into the future will increase the social and economic participation of women\* with disabilities. This will go some way to addressing the existing disadvantage they face.
- There was low uptake of primary financial relief and support options by women\* with disabilities in the ACT.

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<sup>4</sup> This section of the survey was completed before the 2021 outbreak of the Delta Strain, and subsequent lockdown. It is included here because the period is still highly relevant to future emergency and recovery planning.

## **Safety of Women\* with Disabilities**

COVID-19 has resulted in increased domestic violence cases across Australia.<sup>5</sup>

Despite increased funding for domestic violence, our respondents identified that there have not been the resources to meet demand for support services.

### **12% of women\* with disability experienced new or increased domestic violence due to COVID-19.**

- COVID-19 restrictions created conditions for women\* with disability that can exacerbate family and domestic violence.
- 22.73% of LGBTIQ+ people with disability experienced new or increased family or domestic violence during COVID-19 in contrast to 7.25% of cisgender women.
- Women\* with disability aged 25-44 were most at risk of experiencing new or increased domestic or family violence during COVID-19.
- 40% of women\* with disabilities experiencing family or domestic violence did not have access to appropriate services.

## **Key Messages from Women\* with Disabilities**

- COVID-19 exacerbated pre-existing systemic discrimination and marginalisation of women\* with disabilities including.
- Women\* with disabilities in the ACT are calling on the ACT Government to better address systemic disadvantage and discrimination to improve outcomes in future emergencies.
- Women\* with disabilities are calling to be consulted on and included in future emergency planning.

**‘Women with disabilities need to be involved in emergency planning from the beginning and need information in emergencies that is relevant and timely.’** – Survey respondent.

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<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, Else. “The Worst Year’: domestic violence soars in Australia during COVID-19’. *The Guardian*, December 2020. Accessed 12 April 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/dec/01/the-worst-year-domestic-violence-soars-in-australia-during-covid-19>