

## Real equality, or just more of the same?

### Labor Women's Conference 2014

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##### Acknowledgement

Women are taught from a young age that we should be nice, pleasant, calm and polite when we want to speak up. Often we are encouraged not to speak up at all and to let others have the opinions. Women everywhere know that they have to fight hard to build courage to say what they want to say and to be taken seriously when they say it.

It is very common to be told we are being emotional when we speak articulately and passionately about something, when men are never given such tags. Rather they are applauded for being clear minded and having something to say.

This is basic sexism and as women we've all experienced it.

For women with disabilities however there is an extra and very deep layer of prejudice added to the sexism experienced by all women.

People with disabilities are conditioned to be passive and grateful recipients for the support that we get. We are so "other" that many of us feel the need to apologise: for our difference, for taking up too much space, for interrupting someone to ask for assistance. We are made to feel awkward and people find us a bit scary and physically confronting. This is called disability discrimination, and it's the daily experience of people with disabilities in Australia.

Our community doesn't really value the opinions of people with disabilities, certainly doesn't see us as equal participants in public debate, and rarely seeks our opinion about anything. There are few community leaders with disabilities in Australia, and those we have had have mainly worked in the field of disability. The parliaments, judiciary, public sector and corporate world all display a dearth of disability, and particularly at the top. In Australia the few that have risen to leadership positions have also mainly been men. The same sexism that works in the wider world is also at work in the disability community.

Apart from Paralympic athletes (who are "inspiring" and therefore pose no threat), the most common presence of people with disabilities in the public domain is in the media as the subject of case studies. People with disabilities are used for dramatic effect in various tragic stories of lack of support or terrible disadvantage, or occasionally as inspiration porn. These stories only reinforce the pathetic and passive stereotype of people with disabilities that the majority of the community holds. Think about the last time you saw a person with disability on the news or current affairs – were they there as an expert social commentator or as someone who was having a hard time personally?

Something that is less obvious is that most of these stories are also about men with disabilities. Why? Because it is much more likely that the [family of a man with disability](#) will stick by him and advocate strongly for his needs than it is for any woman with disability. Families are more likely to advocate for their sons.

For those of us who acquire disability later, a man's partner is over 80% likely to stick by him, whereas a woman is over 80% likely to have her partner leave her. Effectively once we are no longer lovely attractive women, we are abandoned.

So, the invisible nature of women with disabilities is perpetuated and the prejudice about us being hopeless, passive, incapable, and un-opinionated continues because there is nothing out there to counter it.

So, we are silenced.

For over fifteen years the [figures on who gets disability support](#) haven't changed. Sixty to seventy per cent of disability supports in Australia, both state by state and nationally, go to men with disabilities. So, women with disabilities are less likely to be out and about getting an education, getting employed, developing skills and confidence, and becoming respected.

Women with disabilities are also much more likely to be relying on informal supports, often from friends, neighbours, or ex partner's families, and as a result they experience a very high level of violence, abuse, and exploitation. Violence is about power, and women with disabilities are one of the most disempowered and vulnerable groups in our community. Because they can't get out much, many women are also incredibly isolated and become even more vulnerable to violence and abuse.

Under the current system, when we do manage to get a job we lose access to the few means tested supports that we may have and end up spending our entire income on buying supports on the open market. Most of us live alone, unless we have dependent children, and we are over represented in public housing. Basically we live in poverty, and somehow we have to get by.

End result; we stay invisible in the public domain and the public discourse because we don't have what we need to be visible.

Early indications from NDIS launch sites are that this gender discrepancy won't change without a concerted proactive intention to do so. When the [ACT government undertook gender analysis](#) of its recent grant funding round (a sort of practice run for the NDIS locally) it showed the following:

- It is the families of men with disabilities who are applying for their sons, and they apply for more supports, particularly if the primary carer is also male.
- Women with disabilities are left to apply for themselves, or they must rely on formal support services to do so for them. So, the number of male applicants was more than the number of female applicants.
- Women only asked for basic necessities rather than for everything they need to achieve independence. They needed to be encouraged to ask for what they really needed.

Unless strong mechanisms are built into the NDIS which monitor the gender discrepancy in disability supports AND work to address it nothing will change and women with disabilities will remain invisible.

The result of this continuing invisibility, and lack of equality and respect, is that women with disabilities are not valued when we do speak. Our voices remain marginal, suspect, mistrusted. We have few experts, particularly acknowledged experts, and we usually have to muscle our way into forums as we don't often get asked to attend them.

If women with disabilities assert our view, or question what is happening to us, or develop an opinion about politics or world affairs we are silenced, sometimes brutally. We must not have opinions, certainly shouldn't air them, and if something needs to be said someone will say it for us. We must be good little girls, stay nice, and modestly accept our lot.

A further element of this intersectional discrimination is that we are childified. Many women with disabilities, including myself, speak of being treated as though we are children. It is very common for women with disabilities to be referred to as “girls”, as someone who is still young and must be looked after. Women experiencing this are in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, yet we are still treated like 12 year olds.

Why does this happen? Easy, because young women are less threatening, they will be less experienced, and the community can discount their opinions as naïve if those opinions are inconvenient.

The [International Network of Women with Disabilities](#) has identified violence as our single biggest issue. Everywhere, for all of us. Our second most pressing issue is the appalling lack of disability disaggregated data – we are effectively invisible because no one anywhere bothers to actually collect information about our existence. This is despite the UN repeatedly telling numerous countries, including Australia, that it must do so. No data means no targeted policy, so, for example, the [National Disability Strategy](#) doesn't have a gendered lens. Perhaps it just assumes that what is good for men with disabilities will also somehow be good for women with disabilities. Well that hasn't been the case so far and we're not holding our breath while someone works this out.

We also know that mainstream women's policy forgets about women with disabilities. We have to constantly remind policy makers that we exist and that policy is relevant to us. Most government service delivery areas don't collect data on use by people with disabilities, and on the rare occasions that they do they don't disaggregate disability by gender.

Women with cognitive disabilities in Australia face a 90% sexual assault rate, yet when the first funding round to support the [National Plan to address violence against women and their children](#) was issued only one small project in Tasmania was funded to do anything about it. The organisation that received this funding had no background in working with women with disabilities and spent the first several months of its project approaching women with disabilities' organisations for advice and support. This is despite the National Plan recognising that violence against women with disabilities was a significant problem, and recognising women with disabilities as a key target population.

The lack of funding wasn't because there were no quality proposals put forward; rather it was because every single state or territory prioritised Aboriginal or culturally diverse women. Apart from showcasing some limitations in COAG processes, this spoke volumes for the invisibility of women with disabilities and our key issue of concern. One day I'll ask someone about the grant selection panels, I suspect that there were no women with disabilities involved, rather they were made up of bureaucrats and women's services experts, and of course we aren't in any of those groups.

The levels of violence we experience are very similar to those of our Aboriginal sisters, and our life expectancy is also similar. We also have a similar rate of removal of our children by Child Protection Services, yet there is no national program that is either aware of this or addressing it. In fact the statistics on parents with disabilities in the Child Protection system are still not being collected so most Community Services departments actually deny there is even a problem.

It is critical that Australia addresses the appalling circumstances of Aboriginal women and every single dollar doing this is well spent and needs to be sustained, yet we are doing this while completely missing that for women with disabilities it's a very similar story. We are so good at siloing that we are missing parallels.

Is the reality of women with disabilities just too horrible to contemplate? Perhaps our community can only cope with the horrible disability side of things so the gender stuff misses out? Probably it's a combination of both, with the added complication that the disability community hasn't been great at articulating our common experience. Our Aboriginal colleagues have many lessons to teach us in this regard.

Recent gains are almost solely attributable to the enormous efforts of [Women with Disabilities Australia](#) (WWDA) with its global leadership on violence against women with disabilities and its ground breaking use of the United Nations to do something about it. That said, this work has far more respect in other places than it does in Australia and the expertise of WWDA is often bypassed in favour of service providers and parent lobby groups, those who have the real power in the disability area.

I work in [disability advocacy](#). It is my job to speak up about what is happening to people with disabilities and to do something about it. This is quite confronting for those that I speak to, not just because of the content which is horrible, but also because I have a visible disability. Usually those advocating for people with disabilities are parents or service providers. Someone like me isn't supposed to be articulate, shouldn't have an opinion, and certainly shouldn't hold down a job running an organisation. And there is no way I should be an expert in anything, much less in management, governance, strategy, or human rights which are my areas of key expertise.

The usual response to the discomfort that someone like me causes is to either ridicule us or more usually to simply exclude us from discussions. A recent example of this was an [NDIS webinar](#) celebrating IWD with a focus on women with disabilities. Well good on the NDIS, they at least made a stab at celebrating IWD.

The panel they put together had a single woman with disability alongside a parent and a service provider. This is a ratio we are pretty used to, and at least this panel was all women. Several prominent women with disabilities were approached for suggestions on who should be on the panel but the names that they suggested were ignored in favour of a woman with no expertise in the area of gender and disability. There was simply no excuse for this farce, yet it was undertaken knowingly and brazenly.

A number of women were suggested who could have provided strong insight at this webinar into the intersection of gender and disability, who would have spoken eloquently about how the NDIS might address the appalling levels of violence, the lack of supports, the barriers to employment and education, and the high levels of child removal. Instead women with disabilities resorted to raising these issues via social media attached to the webinar. In the end the social media feed ended up of more interest to the wider audience than the webinar itself.

Women that [my organisation](#) advocates for have an even more challenging time of it. They didn't get to see this webinar. Most live in residential care and require daily support to get by. When these women question their support, raise concerns about violence, or want more control over their lives they are silenced in more overt ways. The two most common forms of silencing are chemical restraint (drugging them quiet) and guardianship (handing their decision making over to someone else), and often it's a combination of both.

So, let's go back to the beginning: as a woman you already need to get some courage together to ask your question, speak your mind, and assert your position. Yet when a woman with disability does this she is either drugged into submission, or her decision making is legally handed over to someone else so that she doesn't have to be listened to - ever again. The best she can hope for is ridicule, belittling and being sidelined, if she's really lucky.

We must remain childlike, good little girls, who don't question and don't rock the boat. Everyone else knows what is best for us and they will do what is right, we don't have to worry about it, and we aren't welcome to worry about it.

Most other women in our community are actively encouraged to find their voice and use it, but for women with disabilities the opposite applies. We are actively discouraged and actively silenced when we do speak up.

People feel threatened if we become competent capable people who run our own lives so the system has done its best to prevent us from having a role. It's perfectly okay to win a gold medal and be amazing on the track, but I reckon this is because most Australians know that they can't do that anyway so it's hardly threatening is it? Peculiarly the most common disability appointments to high level boards and panels are former sports people, despite them having no previous engagement with the disability community, and often no background in understanding the lives of other people with disabilities.

Should we talk about tokens at this point?

It is highly unlikely that people with disabilities, but particularly women with disabilities, will be appointed to something and when we are we will be the only one. Usually parents or service providers are appointed to speak about our experience for us. When people with disabilities are appointed or consulted it is most often men with disabilities who will be appointed, like the ACT NDIS Taskforce advisory group which has 1 woman with disability and 3 men with disabilities on it alongside about 10 other people without disabilities. If you think your state or the federal government is doing any better or differently, then please think again.

As usual this year on International Women's Day I spent the week attending various functions in Canberra. This year I went to the launch at DFAT of Australia's new Global Ambassador for women and girls, lunch at the National Press Club, and a breakfast.

I enjoy attending these events. They bring together all sorts of women and provide a real opportunity to celebrate women's achievements while catching up with old friends and acquaintances.

This year, though, I finally got really tired of being the only (evident) woman with disability in the room. Sure it's been happening for years, but you never actually get used to it. I don't feel token – I'm there in my own right as a woman of significant achievement – but you bet I'm the token crip, oh yeah. Without me there would be no women with disabilities, so I provide a handy way of ensuring that we don't look forgotten by the various powers that be. Although, truthfully, if we weren't there at all I don't think anyone would actually notice.

So, why did it hit home so hard this year? What finally got up my nose when I should be used to what's going on?

It was the talk of gender equality by our new Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women. I'm not sheeting the blame home to her, absolutely not, but the conversation has shifted a bit with the new government as it always does, whoever that government is. New governments bring their own rhetoric and language with them, and that helps to look at things with fresh eyes. This is a good thing, but it can also highlight intractable issues.

At the launch of the new Ambassador I was in a room full of impeccably dressed well educated (mostly) white women in impressive footwear. The talk was about gender equality, a key focus for our new Foreign Minister. At the National Press Club diversity of women was slightly more evident with a few more women of colour present, but effectively it was still a

room full of privileged well educated white women. The young women were private school girls, and the NGOs were of the more conservative bent. Once again the term gender equality was thick in the air.

At the breakfast I was a novelty on my table, with most of the women around me politely asking what I did and what brought me along. I could tell they didn't see me as an equal and cautiously made sure they didn't stuff up about my disability. Fair enough, they probably have little or no experience being near someone like me. Then, unexpectedly, the Chief Minister referred to me in her talk as someone who had been nearby at a critical moment in her political career. Suddenly I was viewed very differently by those women on my table. It didn't matter that I am a leader in my field, run an organisation and had represented our country at the UN, until that point not one of them saw me as equal or relevant to their experience.

Don't get me wrong, these are all fine women, they do amazing things, and they are very pleasant to talk to. I congratulate every single one on their commitment to gender equality, their preparedness to call themselves feminist and to celebrate International Women's Day.

How many of these women, though, are aware that [15% of the world's women](#) are women with disabilities? People with disabilities are the single largest minority on the planet according to the United Nations, and there are more women with disabilities than men. In Australia it is closer to [18% of women](#) who have disabilities. Yes, close to 1 in 5 women in Australia have a disability, yet I was the only one in the room at 3 separate events celebrating women's equality and achievement.

So, for all the language of gender equality and ensuring that women are in the room and part of the decision making, almost 1 in 5 of our women are not there. We don't even get factored into the decision making. When all of these women have a picture in their head of what Federal Cabinet, or [ASX company boards](#), should look like, does that picture include any women with disabilities? I bet it doesn't.

What they probably see is a room that is equally split between privileged white well educated men and privileged white well educated women. How is this gender equality? How is it actually progress? What has really changed?

Can these women speak for the 1 in 5 of their Australian sisters who have disabilities? No, and nor should they. Just as they shouldn't speak for our Aboriginal sisters, or our sisters from culturally diverse backgrounds. The experiences of women of diversity are different and relevant. We bring enormous depth and difference to any conversation on any issue. Most importantly we aren't just focussed on our own space. Just as women generally will talk about finance, geopolitical events, and architecture (for example), and don't stick to childcare or maternity leave. Women of diversity also talk about finance, geopolitical events and architecture, but we will talk about them with very different eyes and understanding.

Equality means a presence of diversity in every room and at every level. If the women's movement isn't fighting for this then something has gone seriously wrong. Broadening one privileged group by adding another will not add diversity to the outcomes of decision makers.

We all expect men to do something about the lack of women in Cabinet or in board rooms, and so women with disabilities expect women without disabilities to do something about the lack of diversity in your rooms. I am not responsible for this, you are.

I will not turn into a different person to gain access to your room, why should I? Rather I will bring me and all of my value to the conversation and you will love the richness that this provides.

Until ALL women are in the room, have a role in decision making, and are present in numbers there can be no gender equality. I encourage women everywhere to understand this and to do something about it. It is up to all women, but particularly women with power, to make sure women of diversity are invited to sit with you, are invited to talk, and are invited to join your networks. It is up to you to make space and to listen.

This [Labor Women's Conference](#) is examining what change is needed in the Labor Party to do gender equality better, but rather than listening to women of diversity and building our views into that conversation, women of diversity are talking at the same time in parallel sessions on the final morning of the conference. You had to choose between disability, Aboriginal women, and Labor Party reform before choosing to be here. I know that would have been a tough choice for me and I'm not sure I would have come to this session, but why aren't all three streams being discussed in the same room?

Women with disabilities don't have any national leadership program, we don't have funding to address the levels of violence we are experiencing, and we simply aren't factored in when board appointments are being made. Until we are getting 50% of the support dollars, and the same attention to getting an education or a job as our male counterparts that won't change. We are invisible through a nasty combination of sex and disability discrimination.

You are the women who can make a change to this situation, but you have to be committed, proactive and serious about it. It will also require enormous persistence, we can help you with that, we've learned to be very good at it.

It is time for:

1. All disability policy and programs, like the National Disability Strategy, to have gender targets built into them and actively monitored.
2. All mainstream government policy, like the National Plan to reduce violence against women and their children to have a disability target built into them and actively monitored.
3. A specific percentage target to be allocated to women with disabilities from funding for national programs like the National Plan to reduce violence against women and their children
4. A national leadership program for women with disabilities
5. a fund to support our travel and engagement so that we can continue to work with our sisters in the Pacific region and globally, remember most of us live in poverty or on low incomes
6. Affirmative action targets for women with disabilities to be appointed to government boards and committees across ALL areas of policy not just disability
7. Specific quotas on the number of people with disabilities appointed to all program and policy development advisory groups, with a specific target for 50% women
8. Political parties to have programs and policies in place to ensure meaningful engagement with women with disabilities, including at the highest levels of leadership

9. Political parties to support disability caucuses within their ranks and to develop internship programs for all federal and state members of parliament.

Women with disabilities are not tokens, but we have been isolated from the community, from its discussions and its decision making. We are the experts in our experience, in what we need and how to address the marginalisation and discrimination that we face, but we have almost no resources including few women who have reached the level of capacity that is needed to make change.

It is time for our experts to be recognised, valued and supported in our work. It is time for our experts to be supported to mentor young women with disabilities so that we can share the enormous workload that is being undertaken by so few of us.

All political parties in Australia need to get better at diversity, but particularly at including and harnessing the expertise of women, with disabilities. No one is doing this well at the moment, and most aren't doing it at all. It isn't about siloing and using the word disability a bit more often; rather, it's about supporting the disability voice within the mainstream forums of your party.

When discussing Labor Party reform consider how that reform will ensure that women with disabilities are in the middle of discussions, not at the fringe, and how we can be part of driving your agenda.

At the National Press Club lunch on IWD ABC journalist [Virginia Hausegger](#) suggested we should be asking "where are the women". What I want to know is "where are ALL of the women".