



Women With Disabilities ACT
Submission to the
Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation
29 February 2024

Women With Disabilities ACT acknowledges and pays respect to the Ngunnawal peoples, the traditional custodians of the ACT Region, on whose land our office is located. We pay our respects their Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their spiritual, social, historical, and ongoing connection to these lands and the contribution they make to the life of the Australian Capital Territory. *Sovereignty was never ceded.*

About WWDACT

Women With Disabilities ACT (WWDACT) is a systemic advocacy and peer support organisation for women, girls, non-binary, and gender diverse people with disabilities in the ACT region. Established in 1995, WWDACT follows a human rights philosophy, based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Elimination of (All Forms Of) Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). It works with government and non-government organisations to improve the status and lives of women* with disabilities in the ACT and surrounding region. Our priority areas include violence prevention, sexual and reproductive health, and healthcare.

WWDACT is a Disabled People's Organisation, governed by women, girls, non-binary, and gender diverse people with disabilities. WWDACT acknowledges the assistance of the ACT Government under the Office for Disability in making it possible to undertake our work.

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Published February 2024

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Our submission

Thank you for the opportunity to submit to this inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT. Women with Disabilities ACT (WWDACT) is a Disabled People's Organisation advocating on behalf of women, non-binary and gender diverse people (women*) in the ACT. Our submission is guided by the lived experience of our broader membership, and specifically conversations with our Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) made up of 5 women* with lived experience of disabilities.

In this submission we wish to draw attention to the loneliness and social isolation experienced by women* with disabilities in the ACT – recognising that it takes multiple forms and is intertwined with policy areas from healthcare to transport. We will also explain how WWDACT's programs provide important opportunities for community building and inclusion amongst women* with disabilities.

Prevalence of loneliness and social isolation for women* with disabilities

People with disabilities experience high levels of social isolation- in Australia in 2021, 1 in 6 people with disabilities reported being socially isolated (compared to 1 in 12 of those without a disability)ⁱ. This social isolation is the result of multiple factors including ableism and discrimination in the community; inaccessible public transport, public spaces and activities; higher rates of violence and abuse; and higher rates of financial strain and poverty.

Women* with disabilities experience even higher rates of social isolation compared to men with disabilities.ⁱⁱ In addition, they are more likely to experience violence leading to loneliness and social isolation including restrictive practices, forced isolation, coercive control or institutionalisation. Women* and girls* with disabilities are often overlooked as a priority group in policies and initiatives to foster social inclusion, despite being a group that experiences high levels of isolation.

Barriers to social inclusion in the ACT

In the ACT, our members have shared countless stories of loneliness and social isolation as women* with disabilities. The experiences below are a snapshot of stories and experiences from our members, showing the ways in which women* with disabilities in the ACT are experiencing social isolation.

Isolation from like-minded people

Our members have told us of the importance of having spaces where women* with disabilities can gather to meet like-minded people, express themselves and share experiences. It can be difficult to find such spaces in the ACT – women* with disabilities can find themselves stuck in a cycle of isolation, where their isolation causes limited access to information about groups and activities. Where support groups or activities exist, they can be difficult to find and it is not always clear if they are able to accommodate particular accessibility needs.

Many initiatives targeted at broader social inclusion are not accessible to or inclusive of women* with disabilities. One member raised the example of funding opportunities for community sports and sporting coaches in the ACT, with participation in community sport often cited as important for social inclusion and building connections (for example, it is a priority action in the ACT Women's Planⁱⁱⁱ). Although sporting clubs are an important site of connection for many people, for some women* with disabilities participation in community sport is not an option. It can be harder to find accessible and inclusive community activities for women* with disabilities, and these often attract less funding or are time-bound groups with no ongoing support.

Our members emphasised the importance of activities where they could meet others like them. For women* with disabilities, experiencing casual ableism from non-disabled people can be isolating and exhausting – from jokes and comments by people who don't understand their disabilities, to being inadvertently excluded from activities when accessibility needs can't be accommodated. There needs to be more permanently funded activities in the ACT which create a safe space for women* with disabilities to build their community and support networks, and feel understood by those around them.

Limitations when support is required

WWDACT conducted a series of consultations to inform our submission to the NDIS review. We heard from our members that there are barriers to meaningfully engaging in community activities when there is a mismatch between their support needs and what is offered by schemes such as the NDIS.

One member mentioned that their NDIS plan would not fund their participation in activities such as craft afternoons, but instead would only fund a support worker to attend with them. This did not make this community activity more accessible for our member, and they felt uncomfortable attending an event accompanied by a support worker which they did not need in this context.

On the other hand, women* with disabilities who live in group homes or institutional living arrangements can experience acute isolation from the rest of the community. Where people with disabilities cannot choose who they live with and are obligated to live in a particular setting to access care, this is in breach of human rights and results in segregation and isolation from the broader community.

WWDACT joins commissioners from the Disability Royal Commission in calling for the phasing out of group homes for people with disabilities^{iv}.

Inclusion in workplaces

Many people in the ACT have moved from another state or territory to access work opportunities. For many people, the workplace is an important place for building friendships and support networks. However for women* with disabilities, who are underrepresented in the workforce and whose accessibility needs are not always accommodated by workplaces, it is often harder to build these connections. As one of our members said, 'the workplace is not always where you can meet people like you'.

It is important that employers in the ACT ensure their workplace is accessible for women* with disabilities. However, it is also important that actions to address inclusion of women* with disabilities extend beyond the bounds of the workplace.

Pregnancy, parenting and caring responsibilities

A number of our members reported increase feelings of loneliness and isolation in the context of pregnancy, maternity and parenting. For the large number of ACT residents who have moved from other states and territories for work, many find themselves removed from their family, friends and support networks during pregnancy and when caring for their new family. This impacts on perinatal mental health of new parents – the ACT has one of the highest rates of postnatal depression in Australia^v. Our members also commented that the cost of living and rental costs make it difficult to relocate or to visit family and friends during these critical periods.

Many women* with disabilities have parenting and caring responsibilities. 32% of all women* with disabilities have parenting responsibilities, and 73% of those aged 35-44 have parenting responsibilities^{vi}. In addition, many women* with disabilities are also unpaid carers for older people or other people with disabilities – making up over one-third of women who are primary informal carers. Women* with disabilities can find it difficult and isolating to juggle these parenting and caring responsibilities alongside appointments and employment demands, compounding feelings of loneliness. Our members have commented that increased affordability and accessibility of childcare would enable them to better juggle the demands of managing care responsibilities and disabilities, leaving more time to engage in social and community activities and build support networks with like-minded people in Canberra.

Safety in public spaces

During WWDACT's consultations about the ACT Women's Third Action Plan, many of our members commented that they felt unsafe in public spaces in Canberra. Specifically, women* felt unsafe in the Civic area, generally unsafe at night time where many areas of Canberra have limited lighting, and some even commented feeling unsafe in their streets. The higher rates of violence faced by women* with disabilities^{vii} can lead to an increased sense of discomfort and danger in public spaces. This is amplified when experiencing microaggressions (such as strangers touching someone's wheelchair without permission), or when

trying to navigate inaccessible public areas (narrow or broken paths, lack of seating).

When women* with disabilities do not feel safe in public spaces, they are less likely to feel comfortable accessing these spaces to participate in community activities. The ACT government should fund accessibility audits of public spaces to ensure that they are accessible to all Canberrans and safe for women* with disabilities. In addition, there needs to be increased funding for all levels of violence prevention against women* with disabilities – in particularly primary prevention in addressing ableism and sexism as drivers of violence.

Inaccessible transport

Transport is key to allowing people to participate in community activities and to visit friends and family. However, for many women* with disabilities in the Canberra community, it is difficult to find accessible transport.

Not all bus and light rail services are able to accommodate women* with disabilities – for example, many electric wheelchairs are over the weight limit for using ramps on Action Busses.

Although our members commented on their increased quality of life and ability to engage in community activities since the recent expansion of the Taxi Subsidy Scheme, there is a lack of wheelchair accessible taxis and drivers in the ACT. The lack of accessible taxis becomes acute on occasions like weekends (when fewer drivers work), large events (when there is increased demand) and particularly for events with high rates of participation of people with disabilities needing accessible transport. One of our members reported waiting up to 2 hours after an event for a 10 minute taxi ride home. Additionally, there are rarely female accessible taxi drivers in the ACT, which many of our members mentioned would make them feel more comfortable.

In our submission to the ACT Women's Third Action Plan^{viii} we recommended that the ACT fund salaried accessible driver roles (with incentives for female drivers) to address this shortage and ensure that women* with disabilities have reliable access to the transportation they need to participate in the community.

Health

Women* with disabilities experience discrimination and unequal health outcomes, restricting them from accessing the healthcare and information they need to be well and to participate in social activities.

Additionally, many women* with disabilities are excluded from sexual and reproductive health information and services which are not accessible for them. In particular, women* with intellectual disabilities have a lack of information and services to learn about sexual and reproductive health.

There is an interplay between health and social connectedness, where poor inclusion can lead to poor health outcomes, and poor health outcomes can further isolate women* with disabilities. We reiterate the importance of fully funding the ACT Disability Health Strategy, which includes recommendations for addressing unequal health outcomes for people with disabilities (including developing sexual health information, education and services for people with disabilities).

How WWDACT contributes to social inclusion

WWDACT has run a number of programs over the past 25+ years aiming to bring women* with disabilities together and build our community, increasing the social connectedness of all women* with disabilities in the ACT. Our systemic advocacy on behalf of women* with disabilities is integral to ensuring government policy and strategy meets the needs of our membership and community. However, the small amount of funding our organisation receives impacts our ability to provide ongoing community activities and peer support. As a consequence much of our work to increase social inclusion and build our community has been reliant on non-recurrent grant funding. For example, we ran a Parenting Peer Support Group over a 12 month period in 2020-2021, but the project was only funded for a year and lack of ongoing funding meant we could no longer facilitate the group after this time.

Increasing ongoing funding to organisations such as WWDACT will allow us to run more ongoing and well-supported activities for our community,

and ensure that support systems are not taken away due to a reliance on short-term grant funding for activities.

Currently WWDACT has two ongoing projects that increase social inclusion for women* with disabilities.

Policy Advisory Committee

In 2023 WWDACT launched our Policy Advisory Committee (PAC), a council made up of 5 people with lived experience of disabilities who inform WWDACT on our policy and advocacy work. One of the outcomes of the PAC is that our members have felt an increased sense of connection to the community and increased confidence for advocating for themselves. Although the purpose of the PAC was to inform WWDACT's systemic policy and advocacy work, regular monthly meetings have provided an opportunity for PAC members to grow friendships within the group, having a safe space to share their experiences. For the small number of PAC members that WWDACT is able to fund to participate on the committee, it has had clear social inclusion benefits.

Crafternoons

In November 2023 WWDACT had a series of three 'crafternoons', hosted at our office in Pearce, where our members could be guided through a craft project, meet other women* with disabilities and grow their networks and communities. The events were a success with some members attending all three afternoons, beginning to strengthen their friendships and connections to WWDACT.

A reflection we have had is that Pearce is inaccessible through public transport and to the percentage of our membership who live northside. With increased community engagement funding we would be able to run more regular events in different locations in the ACT catering to our entire membership base.

Thank you for considering this submission to the Inquiry into Loneliness and Social Isolation in the ACT. It is important that women* with disabilities are considered as a priority group as the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion reflects on how the ACT government can improve social connectedness in the ACT region.

If you would like to discuss this submission further, please contact WWDACT CEO Kat Reed ceo@wwdact.org.au.

ⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. "People with Disability in Australia, Social Inclusion," July 5, 2022. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/social-support/social-inclusion>.

ⁱⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. "People with Disability in Australia (Data Tables)," July 5, 2022. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/babedc59-65b3-4826-924c-69e68a403cd4/aihw-dis-72-2022-inclusion.xlsx.aspx>

ⁱⁱⁱ ACT Government (2023). *Advancing Gender Equality: Third Action Plan 2023-2026*. https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2388103/ACT-Womens-Plan-2016-2026-Third-Action-Plan.pdf

^{iv} Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. "Inclusive Education, Employment and Housing: Summary and Recommendations (Final Report Volume 7)". September 2023. <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2023-09/Final%20Report%20-%20Volume%207%2C%20Inclusive%20education%2C%20employment%20and%20housing%20-%20Summary%20and%20recommendations.pdf>

^v Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2012). *Perinatal Depression: Data from the 2010 Australian National Infant Feeding Survey* (information paper). <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/80df038a-4a03-4214-beca-cfd4b0ac6a43/14496.pdf?v=20230605183132&inline=true>

^{vi} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. "People with Disability in Australia, Personal Life," July 5, 2022. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/people-with-disability/personal-life>.

^{vii} Women with Disabilities ACT. *WWDACT Position Statement One – Prevention of Violence*. <https://d35ohva3c1yycw.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/09121529/WWDACT-Position-Statement-One-Prevention-of-Violence.pdf>

^{viii} Women with Disabilities ACT. *Submission to Third Women's Action Plan*. February 2023. <https://d35ohva3c1yycw.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/28150536/WWDACT-Submission-to-Third-Action-Plan.pdf>