



Graduate Women International (GWI)

International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2025

GWI Discussion Network



International Day of Persons with Disabilities

3 DECEMBER

2025 THEME

The theme for the 2025 International Day of Persons with Disabilities, celebrated on 3 December, is "**Fostering disability-inclusive societies for advancing social progress**"





GWI Discussion Network

For context:

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines disability as the interaction between long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments and the barriers that hinder full and equal participation in society. Disability is therefore not only a medical condition but also a social experience shaped by attitudes, environments, and systems. Importantly, experiences of disability are not uniform. Gender, age, ethnicity, culture, and socio-economic background intersect to shape how individuals experience inclusion or exclusion.

For women and girls with disabilities, this intersectionality can result in multiple and compounding forms of discrimination, affecting access to education, employment, healthcare, and participation in public life. This is particularly relevant for graduate women from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as disability may be experienced and addressed very differently across contexts.



Approaches to disability often reflect either the medical model, which focuses on impairment, or the social model, which highlights the barriers created by society. Many countries now promote inclusive education policies, recognising the right of disabled children to learn alongside their peers, with appropriate support and accommodations. Moving from policy to practice remains a key challenge, and meaningful inclusion requires addressing both structural barriers and social attitudes, particularly those affecting women and girls with disabilities.

For discussion:

For the 2025 International Day of Education Graduate Women International Discussion Network, we pose the following questions:

- How is disability perceived and governed in your country?
- What is meant by "ableism" and how can we educate about this?
- Can you share any "disability stories"?
- How should graduate women approach this topic—should we have any policies?
- It is said that disabled women can face prejudice...any comment?
- How are women and girls advantaged/disadvantaged in their pursuit of education?

Disability is an area of concern in New Zealand and has received a great deal of publicity and attention. However, there is still more that can be done, particularly in terms of research around women with disabilities or disadvantaged women. Key considerations include the financial and psychological impacts that disabilities can have on women and their families.

While it is said that disabled women can face prejudice, I believe this to be true, although the type of prejudice faced likely depends on the nature of the disability. I do not feel I know enough about this issue to comment further. Similarly, the concept of “ableism” is not something I have really encountered, as I am not working in the sector, but it is an area I am keen to learn more about.

My personal experience of disability comes from my family. My mother lived with a serious disability, osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, and as the eldest of five children I helped my mother raise my siblings. There is much more I could share about this experience and I would be happy to do so in person if there is interest.

In terms of education, my only direct experience has been observing the support provided by Otago University and the Polytechnic to students who struggle with dyslexia and other learning difficulties. These institutions offer one-on-one support, and I believe some may also provide financial assistance.

Overall, I believe this is a topic that Graduate Women International (GWI) should investigate further. It is clearly an area of interest and something we all need to consider, particularly as the likelihood of experiencing a disability increases with age.

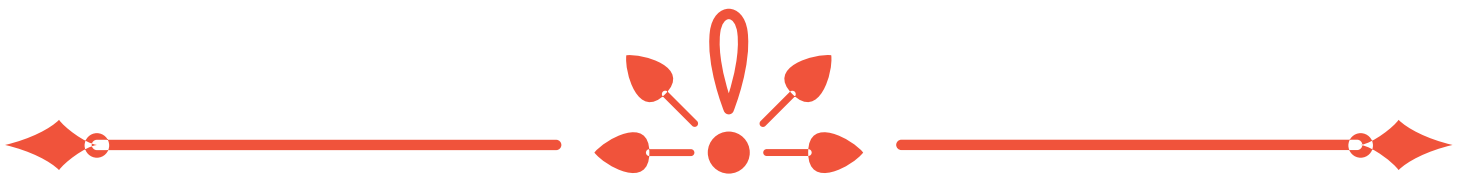
**Otila Osborne,
President Graduate Women New Zealand (GWNZ)**

“ Making concessions for those with disabilities is often be considered unimportant. Often because it is inconvenient for others eg. If a parking spot is labelled for disabled people and not currently being used, then it’s a bonus for others who want a park. People miss the point about those with disabilities not having a lot of options. General principles of inclusion get lip service but not a great deal of attention in the way that makes a difference. Often, equipment that might be made available for disabled people isn’t... because of cost presumably. We are, for instance, well behind Australia in the matter of devices that make amazing differences for people who are blind or have low vision.

Ableism is discrimination against people with disabilities. It’s a general belief that disabled people are inferior and often manifests itself in attitudes and biases that devalue disabled people.

I think it would be great to have support of disabled people as a regular consideration by GW. There could for instance, be a fund available annually that disabled women could access for costs towards educational endeavours. There are many costs that disabled women need to pay in order to do the usual things eg. Special Equipment for recording lectures, transport costs, ...these needs are often hidden to others. Better that a disabled person provides an example. It’s easy to underestimate needs.

**Linda Robertson,
Australian Graduate Women**



As Australian women living with different forms of physical disability, we experience disability not as an individual deficit, but as something shaped by systems, attitudes, and environments. In Australia, disability is governed by a combination of human rights legislation, anti-discrimination law, and social policy, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme. While these frameworks represent progress, lived experience often reveals a gap between policy intent and everyday reality. Access, participation, and recognition remain inequitable, particularly for women.

Ableism, in our experience, refers to the assumption that non-disabled ways of being, learning, working, and communicating are the default or ideal. It is often subtle rather than overt. It appears in lowered expectations, exclusion from decision making, inaccessible systems, and the framing of disability as a medicalised social problem to be fixed, managed or cured, rather than being acknowledged and responded to as part of the human experience. Education about ableism must begin with listening to disabled people and valuing lived experience as a legitimate form of expertise.

Disability stories are often shared only when they fit narratives of inspiration or resilience. Our different stories and experiences are less about overcoming disability and more about navigating systems that were not designed with us in mind, particularly as Denise's physical disability is visually apparent. Barriers have included inaccessible education environments, assumptions about capacity, and the additional emotional labour required to constantly self-advocate. At the same time, disability has shaped a strong sense of social awareness, adaptability, and commitment to equity.

Disabled women do face distinct and intersectional forms of prejudice that compound throughout the life course. Gendered expectations intersect with disability to limit opportunities, undermine credibility, and increase vulnerability to economic insecurity and violence. These experiences are frequently under-recognised in policy and public discourse.

In relation to education, women and girls with disability in Australia continue to experience inequity, exclusion, inadequate reasonable adjustments, and low expectations. While inclusive education is a stated goal, its implementation remains inconsistent. Graduate women can play an important role by advocating for inclusive policies, embedding disability perspectives across organisational work, and ensuring disabled women are represented in leadership and decision making.



● ● ● However, we do not need people to advocate for us, Graduate women like ourselves can advocate for ourselves, we just need those without disability who in power to find the courage to share their power by creating space for us that gives us the respect and dignity needed for us to inform policy that impacts our lives. It also requires greater public awareness of the everyday lives of people with disability who are often positioned as "super crips" or "pity porn", to show that we do have educations, we are daughters, mothers, aunties, sisters, friends and colleagues who have rights, human rights.

We believe graduate women organisations should adopt clear policies that affirm disability inclusion, challenge ableism, and recognise intersectionality. This includes committing to accessible practices, valuing lived experience, and actively supporting disabled women to participate fully and visibly in society as a whole.

Social progress cannot occur without disability inclusion. Inclusion is not an act of charity, but a matter of rights, justice, and shared benefit. Disabled women must be recognised not only as beneficiaries of inclusion, but as contributors, leaders, and agents of change.

Dr Denise Beckwith PLY,
Associate Lecturer in Social Work, School of Social Sciences,
Western Sydney University and Disability Advisor,
Australian Graduate Women



Catriona McBean, GWNZ

I completed my PhD in Disability Sport in 2023 which addresses some of these issues.

"I forget I have a disability":
Understanding young peoples' experiences in disability sport and active recreation in Aotearoa New Zealand

You can find the full thesis at <https://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/entities/publication/de68ecad-a3b4-4a40-b3f8-35f471317540>

Lorraine Isaacs, GWNZ

I think these questions are a good basis for discussion about disabilities.

I am a volunteer at the University of Otago to supervise, read and write for disabled students for tests and exams. For the 2025 final exams there were over 2,000 disabled students needing help with exams. They weren't all disabled, but English doesn't seem to provide a word to cover students needing help because they need to breastfeed their baby, or they've broken their collarbone at rugby, or they need to eat something for their diabetes.

In Japan, disability is addressed through both educational and legal frameworks. There are special schools for physically handicapped students, and in general, people tend to show sympathy and respect toward parents who have handicapped children. From a legal perspective, the Act for Eliminating Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities was enforced in June 2013. This act initially instructed private sector companies to make efforts to provide disabled employees with “rational considerations.” Following a revision in May 2023, private sector companies are now obliged to provide such considerations.

“Ableism” refers to discrimination against people with physical or mental disabilities. Many physical disabilities are caused by uncontrollable factors such as illness, accidents, or hereditary conditions at birth. Parents who have disabled children often carry tremendous burdens in life, and society should embrace both them and their families. NGOs and NPOs can play an important role by inviting parents to speak about their difficulties as well as their joys, helping to generate broader understanding and support.

Japan also has inspiring disability stories. One example is the renowned pianist Nobuyuki Tsuji, who was born blind and became a professional pianist. Although he cannot see anything, he can hear everything, and his ability to play classical music without watching the keyboard or reading scores amazes audiences around the world.

His mother reportedly overcame her own desperation by helping him experience the beauty of the world through sound, senses, and emotion. Raised with love and guidance, he became a musical genius who learned classical music solely by listening.

In terms of how graduate women should approach this topic, Graduate Women International (GWI) could encourage disabled women to join the organization as associate members. If joining is difficult, local chapters could invite them to speak at meetings, share their difficulties and joys, and help improve support for them and their families.

It is often said that disabled women can face prejudice. Knowing she is disabled, a woman may become more modest or humble in order to endure discrimination, but she should be encouraged and trusted to live her life with confidence and dignity as a human being.

Regarding education, women and girls may be advantaged or disadvantaged depending largely on their parents’ values. If parents are conservative and do not believe in women’s higher education, their daughters are disadvantaged from the outset. Conversely, girls and women whose parents value higher education are advantaged. Early education and home education therefore play crucial roles even before formal schooling begins.

Kei Foran, Japanese Association of University Women

 In Egypt, disability perception and governance are undergoing a significant transition from traditional "charity-based" model to a modern "right-based" framework, through practical implementation remains a challenge. Egypt has established a robust legal structure to protect the right of its. Constitutional protection: Article 81 of the 2014 constitution (and 2019 amendment) explicitly commits the state to guarantee health, economic, social and educational rights for persons with disabilities, ensuring their integration and equal opportunities. Ableism is prejudice, discrimination, or systematic barriers against people with disabilities. Key Aspects of Ableism:

1. Attitudes and beliefs: Devaluing people with disabilities, assuming they need to be cured, or seeing them as objects of pity or inspiration rather than equals.
2. Systematic Discrimination: Exclusion embedded in institutions, laws and societal structures, such as in accessible buildings, technology, or healthcare systems.
3. Interpersonal Actions: Conscious or unconscious biases, like failing to provide accommodations speaking over disabled people, or making assumptions about their capabilities.
4. Intersectionality: Ableism interacts with other forms of discrimination (gender, race, etc), creating unique challenges for multiply marginalized people.

Graduate women should approach persons with disabilities with inclusive mindset, focusing on respect, accessibility and equality. Graduate women should have policies:

- A- Comprehensive Accessibility Statements: A clear, public statement outlining the university's commitment to accessibility and non-discrimination.
- B- Reasonable Accommodations process: A clear, efficient and well-publicized process for requesting and receiving reasonable accommodations, managed through a dedicated.
- C- Inclusive campus Design: policies should mandate physical and digital accessibility, following guidelines.
- D- Awareness and Training: Mandatory, recurring training for all faculty, staff and graduate students on disability etiquette.
- E- Promote an inclusive culture: Encourage discussions and provide platforms for students with disabilities to share their experience and for the wider community to learn from them.

Examples of Egyptian success stories

Islam Amr: A child with muscular dystrophy, he overcame his disability to become a swimming champion, winning national championships and many medals, defying the physical difficulties he suffers from.

Zainab Al-Shaer: A young woman who suffered a spinal fracture that led to hemiplegia, but she turned her wheelchair into a symbol of independence. She graduated from law school and worked as a manager in a prosthetics company supporting her colleagues with disabilities.

Shaima Mohammed Fawzi: The first blind teaching assistant at Beni Suef University, she challenged her visual impairment to excel in her studies and become part of teaching staff, fulfilling a dream she had throughout her university years.



● ● ● The statement that " disabled women can face prejudice" is strongly supported by research and the lived experiences of many individuals. The prejudice they face is of ten multi-layered, requiring specific attention and targeted adavocacy efforts to promote equality and inclusion.

Despite women and girls with disabilities having the same rights to education as their male counterpart and non- disabled peers, girls with disabilities are the most excluded group of children from all educational settings from primary school to higher education settings due to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination on the basis of both gender and their disability.

Education offers tremendous advantages for women and girls with disabilities fostering economic independence, boosting self- esteem and confidence, improving health, strengthening communities, and enabling them to overcome societal barriers, leading to greater participation, leadership and a life free from violence, ultimately empowering them to reach their full potential.

**Koutelkloub Ibrahim,
President Egyptian Association for Graduate women**

Dealing with Disabilities

People with disabilities in New Zealand face a variety of issues. In some ways the disabled receive quite a lot of support and recognition of their disability. For example, there is usually a person signing beside a public speaker and in general a person with poor eyesight or hearing receives respect when they wear a badge informing others of their disability. In New Zealand there are private organisations that give support to those with disabilities and their families, and these groups are usually begun by people who have family members with the disability. The New Zealand Government also provides social welfare allowances and in education children with a disability may receive teacher aide time as well as physical resources to help the school and family. But the resources are in no way sufficient for everyone who needs them.

Abelism is best countered by making people with disabilities part of the community. If we are familiar with others and their needs we are more inclined to support them. Children in schools need to have others with disabilities in their classes or schools and learn how to help them become active contributors to the community. The secret is awareness and graduate women can help, whether as members of families where there is someone with a disability or in their workplaces, whether this is a school or a retail or industrial place. Women with disability have the double disadvantage of their gender as well as their disability and graduate women can help by providing scholarships and allowances.

Bernadette Devonport, GWNZ



This discussion was created by GWI Vice President for Education, Dr. Shirley Gillett and moderated, designed, and published by the GWI office, consisting of: Stacy Dry Lara, Executive Director and, Mila METIVIER, intern.

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