

Women and Disability Forum

He waka eke noa - We're all in this together.
That was the strong message for feminists from the
Women and Disability Forum held on Tues 13 March.

Dr Huhana Hickey, disability, legal and human rights expert, outlined the need to unite women (whether disabled or non-disabled), Māori, Pacific people, migrants and those who identify as LGBTQI - to tackle discrimination.

"We need not to be afraid of activism," Huhana told the 50-strong audience. "We've got to



Jo Butler, Tanya and Huhana

strengthen the disability movement and society has to pick up its game."

Speaker after speaker outlined the challenges disabled women face:

- Only 24% of disabled people are employed, compared to 74% of non-disabled people.
- Disabled women earn, on average, \$30,000 less than disabled men.
- A higher number of Māori (than non-Māori) with disabilities live on less than \$15,000 per year.
- Women with disabilities are much, much more likely than other women to face abuse, including by 'carers' and family.

Next year, the United Nations will examine New Zealand's compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. "The UN needs to ask difficult questions of New Zealand," **Paula Tesoriero, the Disability Rights Commissioner** told the forum. "Disabled New Zealanders have a long way to go to enjoy the rights outlined in the Convention."

The importance of disabled women telling their own stories, and conveying their diversity beyond statistics, was highlighted by **Tanya Black**, the General Manager of Attitude Media, a broadcast and digital company. She spoke of how before her accident, she had never seen people in wheelchairs in the workplace.

Tanya gave the example of Siobhan Fahey, a young girl with cerebral palsy, who was interviewed outlining her love of sport. One media outlet described her as a



Paula Tesoriero, Commissioner

"Paralympic hopeful" while another cast her as a "Cerebral palsy sufferer". "Think about the ideology behind those two tag lines," Tanya said. "It matters that teachers, peers and future employers see her as someone with potential."

Pia Jane, a deaf disability rights campaigner, gave powerful testimony of lived experience of deaf women's "language deprivation" – being excluded from education and family communication – and not having the language to report abuse. She said these



Pia Jane, deaf disability advocate

negative experiences had put "fire in her belly" to change things. The need for the #MeToo campaign to highlight the voices of disabled women was also raised.

Speakers agreed that one of the most pressing issues facing disabled women is the current End of Life Choice Bill. Speakers and audience members expressed fears that it could lead to euthanasia of disabled people, or people with disabilities deciding to end their lives because of the perception of being a burden. Paula was lobbying hard against the bill, which has too wide a scope beyond terminal illness.



Tanya, MC Nicola Owen and Huhana

Audience members spoke of the lack of accessible accommodation for older people with disabilities. One woman in a wheelchair described how when she was visiting a friend in a retirement village she asked if she could live there when she was ready. She was told that that would not be possible because her wheelchair is too big!

Less than 2 per cent of Housing NZ's stock is accessible. The need for accessibility legislation was raised. The fact that not all women's refuges have full accessibility was raised as a problem for both women fleeing violent situations, and staff working there.

One of Paula's priorities was to address the lack of data about disabled people, which results in inadequate service delivery. Huhana criticised the census' limited definition of disability, which meant that District Health Boards' budgets (based on numbers) would be insufficient. She also criticised the omission of neurodisability in surveys on disability.

Audience members berated the census' lack of accessible formats for people with visual impairments, with lots of complaints by blind and vision impaired people. MC Nicola Owen urged everyone to spread the word that if people couldn't complete the census, they should ring Statistics New Zealand who would send someone to help.

Changing attitudes needn't take years and years, Paula said. "I don't have the patience." With digital and social media, she was confident that we could all pull off something extraordinary to turn the stigma around.

This was an incredibly moving and informative forum that urged us all to listen to disabled women. To join with them to end discrimination, barriers and abuse, so that the capability and humanity of people with disabilities can shine.

He waka eke noa.

Save the date!
#metoo forum
Tues 29th May, 7-9pm
all genders welcome