Partners on the ANROWS Research Program project What does it take? Developing informed and effective tertiary responses to violence and abuse for women and girls with disabilities in Australia, Dr Patsie Frawley and Keran Howe, speak with us about how their project was conceived and why collaboration between researchers and service providers is so important.

How did you come together to develop this partnership and how did this research project come about?

PF Keran and I have had a working relationship across a few different places and different roles but it was when Keran was the Chair of the Victorian Disability Advisory Council and I was the Executive Officer that we really got to work closely. My research interest in disabilities has been around sexuality and relationships from at least the late 1990s. I did some work on sexual assault and women with intellectual disabilities for Family Planning Victoria. Leading on from that I did work around relationships and people with disabilities in a project called Living Safer Sexual Lives. So I’ve maintained an interest and involvement in that kind of research. Having Women with Disabilities Victoria (WDV) and Keran as head of the organisation has made connections across research and evaluation much more possible, through participation on advisory groups and in different projects.

KH I suppose I came to the issue of disability and gender from Women’s Health where I worked for a long time. I had an interest in responses to violence in the health sector, and a concurrent interest in health issues for women with disabilities as a woman with a disability myself. So I welcomed the opportunity to be involved in developing WDV.

At WDV we did some initial research looking at family violence services, practice and policy, which was called Building the Evidence. It was focused on the Victorian family violence sector. More recently we’ve done research around voices against violence and looking at the nature of violence against women with disabilities in Victoria. So it’s a natural progression to be looking at best practice within domestic violence and sexual assault services. It’s important we make a practical application/tool for the violence response services to know how to respond to women with disabilities, and what best practice means.

It was great to have the opportunity to partner with Patsie and now with Deakin University. We’ve partnered on other projects quite recently, regarding tools for women with disabilities; violence prevention; a peer education program that grew out of Patsie’s work in peer education for women with disabilities; and we’ve had some shared involvement in the Making Rights Reality project which also brought in the South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault (SECASA). All of these projects brought us together.

PF The task never ends but it does change along the way and we’ve been pushing from our respective bases to achieve progress. Building the Evidence was a significant piece of work that really shone the light on what the issues were and Voices against Violence is...
another important piece of work from WDV. People like me in research roles in universities, we really do tag along sometimes. My role is to try and pick up where we can do focused research that will support work done in places like WDV in policy, advocacy and research.

In a way this project came out of the Making Rights Reality project, which Keran was on the reference group for and I was evaluating, so they all kind of link in and add onto each other. There's always room for research, advocacy, support, guidance and I guess we tend to do them together.

KH Having Sally Robinson from Southern Cross University, Sue Dyson from the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society and the Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA) Forum involved [in this project] gives it a broader focus, across Australia and on violence against women rather than just domestic violence or sexual assault.

PF The CASA Forum’s role in the project comes from their most recent work on Making Rights Reality. Dagma, the representative from the SECASA on this project has been active in their work on gender and violence. So the sectors are coming together.

KH Dagmar was the Project Coordinator for the Making Rights Reality project, which is a very practical service response to women with cognitive disabilities and communicative disabilities who have experienced sexual assault. More recently Dagmar has worked in our violence prevention program which is a gender and disability workforce development program for disability services. We’ve been very keen to make sure we’re building cross-sectoral relationships between family violence, sexual assault and disability services.

PF It is that cross sectoral work that has brought us together and keeps us together. The Living Safer Sexual Lives: Respectful Relationships model is a cross-sectoral model. Where it runs, there is a cross-sectoral group that includes women with disabilities themselves and representatives from sexual assault, violence and abuse, and sexual health services, that support that program. That model is firmly established in the way that we approach how things are done.

Violence against women with disabilities isn’t a disability issue, it is an issue for all of those sectors to consider and to do something about. I try to shape the methodology of the research that I do from that model and WDV have always put that approach at the centre of their work as well.

KH Yes we have. We’re aware there has not been a strong awareness of gender in disability services. Abuse of people with disabilities in general is a significant issue and the compounding effect of gendered disadvantage has not been sufficiently considered. Similarly, traditional violence response services haven’t been so aware of the needs of women with disabilities and picking up on how their services can better suit their needs.

While we aren’t a service provider, we have strong relationships with service providers and with violence response services, women’s services and disability services. This project will be really important for our advocacy and the application of best practice through our workforce development program and ongoing collaborative relationships. We can utilise this knowledge by referencing the research.

How will this project help both disability services and violence prevention services?

PF Because this project uses a participatory methodology, and because we are using the project to bring together those sectors anyway, it is my view that we won’t be waiting until the outcomes of this project for that engagement to happen.

The work that I’ve done on Living Safer Sexual Lives: Respectful Relationships identifies that doing the research in that way means that on the way you have formed relationships and networks already. And those organisations are learning along the way and thinking about how to improve their work. So I’m hopeful that the question about how do we get people to listen and participate may also be answered as we go.

KH In terms of how we disseminate the findings and the tool (to be developed as part of this project), having a very strategic, targeted dissemination approach will make sure the relevant sectors all have access, not just the usual domestic and family violence services, and sexual assault services.

Are there any observations or surprises from the early stages of the project?

PF Yes, and they are always around the realities of doing a research project. We had a great meeting of the partners and the advisory group but it took some time to get everyone together. It’s not a surprise but a reality that while partnership research is important it’s a challenge because of the way our different sectors work. Everybody wants organisations like WDV, PWDA and the CASA forums on their advisory group, so it puts a lot of pressure on everybody to try and participate. So rather than push things through and not do them properly our approach has been to do it well, to make sure we’re not rushing ahead and leaving people behind. If participation is a big part of this research, which it should be, and it is, then we have to take the time. It’s a challenge, but it becomes a question of how work is prioritised and how we manage those timelines. We’ll always manage them in a way that ensures the work is meaningful for those involved.

Another challenge has been that we were originally going to look at four sites to have those research networks developed in different states and territories.
In addition to support from ANROWS, what has been your approach to ensure services around the country have access to the findings of the research?

KH People with Disabilities Australia (PWDA) and Advocacy for Inclusion (ACT) are involved on the reference group so that’s a key point of dissemination in the disability sector. We are also having discussions about working with Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA) to utilise their networks in getting engagement across the country.

PF It’s important to ensure we have national organisations on our advisory group, or at least engage with them, through PWDA and our link to the National Disability Advocacy Alliance, First People’s Disability Network, and Women with Disabilities Australia. It is a challenge for the project to have the national reach, but we have strategies. Funding is always the question when you’re trying to do national work, especially when it’s hands on like this one is.

How did you develop the participatory methodology and why did you choose three sites as a focus? What do you hope it will achieve?

PF The methodology uses an approach that has the best chance for participation by people to whom this research matters; that is women and girls with disabilities, advocates for women and girls with disabilities, service providers and the community. The methodology draws on the idea of “nothing about us, without us” advocacy and self-advocacy. It’s within a participatory framework, which is often used in feminist and disability research. It all ties up to a question about what should be happening in research, of and about women with disabilities. My methodological stance is that it needs to be participatory and inclusive, but it needs to be done well.

We think that the question of the methodology is really important. Our team has made a decision to spend some time and focus on methodology that aims to be empowering and participatory, and to some extent capacity building within its approach. We think there is a real need to progress that knowledge, so we’ll be seeking funding elsewhere to further that work.

KH It also relates strongly to the history of how disability services have been provided; which has been a charity model where organisations have been “doing to” rather than “working with” people with disabilities. This is where that “nothing about us, without us” mantra comes in. Historically it has been a very paternalistic sector, and people with disabilities are absolutely sensitive and attuned to having agency. Research needs to be an empowering process; it needs to draw on expertise and lived experience. I suppose this is where it aligns with feminist practice.

PF In terms of site numbers, we wanted to do four but in the end we are doing three. Research funds always dictate how much you can do. We all know about the tyranny of distance, and the cost of distance, so that’s how we came to that.

You always start a project with great enthusiasm and aspiration for what it can achieve. My aim is to keep that going and to be practical about it in saying “well we do what we can do”. So it will be three sites, but if we can do that in an in depth way where we ask questions about the methodology used as well, we will get a really deep understanding. Lots of other research has looked at questions of access, all important work. But as one of the advisory group members said, we’ve been looking for a long time and it’s now time to do something. So that’s going to be the mantra for me, to keep the “doing” in focus.

I think ANROWS is a really great organisation to help us do that because there’s a real sense of optimism about what we can achieve. There’s a commitment to getting the information out there, making it accessible, and ensuring it can be used as it’s developed. All of that fits really well into our methodology and what we’re trying to achieve.