



Women
With
Disabilities
Australia
(WWDA)

Submission

Supported Employment

For submission to Next Steps in Supported Employment:
Consultation on the way forward

Department of Social Services

Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA)

3 July 2025



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Publishing information

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted.

Author: Women With Disabilities Australia.

Title: Submission to Next Steps in Supported Employment: Consultation on the way forward.

Language note

This submission reflects the overlapping experiences of marginalisation experienced by women, girls, nonbinary and gender-diverse people in our membership and broader community. Though these groups will experience gender discrimination and marginalisation, not all identify as women. WWDA's submission may reflect the specific experiences of trans, non-binary and gender-diverse people with disability. However, the experiences of trans, non-binary and gender-diverse people with disability warrant specific and direct exploration, particularly how they intersect with employment. WWDA recognises the limitation in aggregating our submission at a broader level of gender-marginalised people. WWDA aims to work in coalition with, rather than replicate the core work of organisations who represent and advocate for LGBTQIA+ people with disability.

This submission uses 'person first' language (for example: women with disability). We acknowledge people describe their experience of disability in different ways, and for many people, 'identity first' language is a source of pride and resistance.

Acknowledgement of Country

The authors acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this publication was produced. We acknowledge First Nations people's deep spiritual connection to this land. We extend our respects to community members and elders past, present and emerging.

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WWDA has Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United States





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About the authors

Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA) is the National Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) and National Women's Alliance (NWA) for women, girls, feminine identifying, and non-binary people with disabilities in Australia. As a DPO and an NWA, WWDA is governed, run, led, staffed by, and constituted of, women, girls, feminine identifying, and non-binary people with disabilities. Our organisation operates as a transnational human rights organisation - meaning that our work, and the impact of our work, extends beyond Australia. WWDA's work is grounded in a human-rights based framework which links gender and disability issues to a full range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

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"Member insights are displayed like this."

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Introduction

Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Next Steps in Supported Employment: Consultation on the way forward. Our submission draws on WWDA's extensive advocacy history, including responses to the Jobs and Skills Australia: Gender Economic Equality Study Consultation¹, Response to the Employment Issues Paper of the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability² and Response to the Disability Employment Centre of Excellence Options Paper³. This submission also draws on the lived experiences of WWDA members, extensive consultation data, published research and the collective expertise of disability led organisations. It highlights the urgent need for reform in supported employment, guided by intersectional and rights-based principles that reflect the voices of those most affected.

WWDA recognises that Supported Employment is intricately linked to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of people with disability. As WWDA advocated throughout the Disability Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (DRC), the Royal Commission's analysis of the issue of employment must start from the premise and recognition that segregation of people with disability – including in Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs), and other forms of segregated settings and environments – remain State sanctioned practices that enable violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation to flourish. WWDA's recommendations align with a number of the DRC recommendations and findings, specifically Recommendation 7.31: Raise subminimum wages, and Recommendation 7.32: End segregated employment by 2034. However, WWDA calls for immediate commitment to address these systemic inequalities and strongly opposes timeframes for transition that do not result in immediate action.⁴ WWDA recognises that the transition must be deliberate and accompanied by comprehensive support for people with disability, and reasserts our view that further consultation is required to determine specific timeframes and measures to achieve these outcomes.⁵

WWDA's recommendations are grounded in Australia's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)⁶, the Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality (Priority Area 3)⁷, and Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 (Outcome 2: Economic Security).⁸ Appendix 1 of this submission presents WWDA members' lived experiences of barriers to employment, economic insecurity, discrimination and exclusion from meaningful work. These insights were collected through WWDA's 2025 Supported Employment Survey and two national roundtables on employment and economic security. The evidence provided reflects the diverse realities of our members and their recommendations for reform, aligning with the terms of reference for this consultation. These personal

accounts are further supported by current research and policy analysis, detailed throughout this submission.

Key recommendations

Recommendation 1: Phase out sub-minimum wages, to ensure people with disability (including women and gender-diverse people) receive fair pay.

Recommendation 2: Establish a Ministerial Implementation Working Group as recommended by Inclusion Australia to provide evidence-based policy advice and options relating to DRC Recommendation 7.31.

Recommendation 3: Phase out segregated employment, with comprehensive support for people with disability to transition into open employment. This includes by taking the following actions:

Recommendation 3.1: Deliberately design transitional pathways into open employment.

Recommendation 3.2: Mandate the development of individualised employment plans for all ADE workers during the transitional period, as recommended by Inclusion Australia.

Recommendation 3.3: Develop systems to support people with disability and their families and supporters with the transition from segregated employment.

Recommendation 4: Address gender-based violence and abuse in the workplace.

Recommendation 5: Support flexible and accessible work options and practices.

Recommendation 6: Embed lived experience and co-design in all aspects of supported employment reform (including design and delivery).

Recommendation 7: Provide training, mentoring and support for employers and for women and gender-diverse people to gain and keep employment.

Recommendation 8: Reform the Disability Support Pension.

Recommendation 9: Set disaggregated employment targets for people with disability, including specific targets for employing people with intellectual disability.

Recommendation 10: Embed supported decision making across all employment supports and reforms.

Recommendation 11: Provide and promote tailored and individualised supports for people with disability to access open employment.

Terms of reference addressed:

This submission addresses the following questions from the consultation paper, with a specific focus on the systemic inequalities experienced by women and gender-diverse people with disability:

- **Q1:** Is there any other existing work that is missing from Appendix 3?
- **Q2:** What is your ideal future state for the supported employment sector?
- **Q3:** What additional actions are needed to increase open/inclusive employment?
- **Q4:** What would you like to see in a roadmap for reform?

Q1: Is there any other existing work that is missing from Appendix 3?

WWDA acknowledges the Government's list of existing work in supported employment is comprehensive, but recommends an explicit focus on gender-responsive approaches to address the intersectional and systemic barriers that women and gender-diverse people with disability face. In the context of employment and other areas of life, the situation of women and girls with disability is not only worse than that of women without disability, but also worse than that of their male peers. For example, only 20% of women with disability are employed full-time, compared to 29% of men with disability, 48% of women without disability, and 64% of men without disability.⁹ This is due to a combination of factors, including stigma and discrimination, as well as high rates of unpaid work. Women with disability face persistent pay inequalities due to stereotypes, bias and discrimination based on both gender and disability, and because of employment in informal or alternative settings.¹⁰

Women with disability are disproportionately affected by discrimination in accessing employment and equal pay for work of equal value. This results in lower earnings and lower employment rates than men (with and without disability) and women without disability.¹¹ Where support for employment is available, there may be gendered differences in access to and effectiveness of that support.¹² Women with disability also face compounded discrimination in relation to gendered caring responsibilities, lack of flexible work options and gender-based violence.¹³ Women with disability experience high rates of harassment and bullying in employment settings.¹⁴ This highlights the importance of ensuring that the transition from segregated employment to open employment includes measures to identify, prevent and respond to the high incidence of harassment and abuse that may emerge as women with disability move into open employment settings.

Q2: What is your ideal future state for the supported employment sector?

WWDA has long called for an employment system that upholds human rights, promotes gender equality, and ensures the full inclusion of women and gender-diverse people with disability. For many years, WWDA has advocated for the abolition of discriminatory and segregated employment models that devalue people with disability and entrench gendered experiences of poverty. To deliver meaningful reform, WWDA calls for the phasing out of segregated employment and sub-minimum wages, with support for people with disability (and their families and supporters) to navigate the transition. These reforms must be designed and implemented in partnership with people with disability, their supporters and representative organisations. They must be underpinned by lived experience and

co-designed to ensure that transitions out of exploitative systems lead to sustainable, empowered outcomes that support the realisation of fundamental human rights.

WWDA also acknowledges the work and advocacy of Inclusion Australia and Down Syndrome Australia and supports their recommendations for reform.

Phasing out sub-minimum wages

Every person has the right to earn a fair living wage for their work. The future of supported employment must end the practice of sub-minimum wages which undermines the economic security and dignity of people with disability. An inclusive supported employment system must ensure that all people with disability can access meaningful work in open, inclusive, and accessible workplaces, with the same rights and protections as others. In this context, specific, targeted measures are required to realise the rights of women and gender-diverse people with disability.

“It is a human right to be paid the minimum of wage. It is not possible for people with a disability to live independent lives, if they are only paid \$3 an hour.”

WWDA calls for the complete phase out of sub-minimum wages, consistent with the recommendations of United Nations treaty monitoring bodies, including the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.¹⁵ This must be delivered through a time-bound, government-supported and co-designed approach that centres the voices and experiences of people with disability and their families and supporters.¹⁶

“There should be one minimum wage for everyone, the current system creates a class system where we don’t value people with intellectual disability and what they can bring to a workforce. No one’s contributions should be paid \$3 an hour- ADEs need to change their business model.”

WWDA acknowledges the differing views on the timeframes proposed by Recommendation 7.31 of the DRC. We reassert our position that sub-minimum wages are unacceptable, and call for immediate steps towards ending wage discrimination, while recognising the need for a deliberate approach to ensure there are no unintended consequences. WWDA endorses Inclusion Australia’s (IA) 2025 Election Platform, calling for the establishment of a Ministerial Implementation Working Group in relation to Recommendation 7.31 of the DRC.¹⁷ As recommended by IA, the working group would provide evidence-based policy advice and options in addressing sub-minimum wages. The Working Group would bring together different stakeholders, including representation from peak organisations, ensuring

the voices of the disability community are used to “create a sustainable roadmap for achieving fair wages and ensuring continued employment opportunities”.¹⁸

Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Phase out sub-minimum wages, to ensure people with disability (including women and gender-diverse people) receive fair wages.

Recommendation 2: Establish a Ministerial Implementation Working Group, as recommended by Inclusion Australia, to provide evidence-based policy advice and options relating to Disability Royal Commission (DRC) Recommendation 7.31.

Phasing out segregated employment

The future of supported employment must be firmly grounded in human rights and dignity. This requires phasing out segregated employment settings such as ADEs which separate people with disability from the broader community and perpetuate discrimination, abuse and exploitation. The impact of segregated employment is widespread, with 70% of NDIS participants aged 25+ with intellectual disability in employment, working in ADEs.¹⁹ ADEs maintain inequality by offering sub-minimum wages and limited pathways to open employment, disproportionately affecting women with intellectual disability who face additional barriers due to gendered assumptions about care roles and “low skill” labour.²⁰ This systemic exclusion contravenes Australia’s obligations under the CRPD Article 27 (right to work) and entrenches gendered poverty, as women with disability encounter a double burden of occupational segregation and wage theft.²¹

As the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has stated, segregated forms of employment, including sheltered workshops, should not be regarded as evidence of ‘progressive realisation’ of the right to work. This right is realised only when people with disability have access to employment that is freely chosen or accepted, and undertaken within an open, inclusive, and equitable labour market.²² United Nations treaty monitoring bodies, and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, have repeatedly expressed concern about ADEs in Australia and recommended that they be abolished.²³

Recommendation 7.32 of the DRC calls for a phased closure of segregated employment settings, however, WWDA is concerned that the proposed timeline prolongs the discrimination and exclusion faced by women and gender-diverse people with disability. In WWDA’s preliminary response to the Final Report of the DRC, we provided in-principle support for Recommendation 7.32, but recommended further consultation on the timeframes proposed.²⁴ At present, WWDA notes that the Government has only accepted this recommendation in principle. WWDA urges a swift approval to implement the necessary reforms,

ensuring the transition begins immediately and is supportive of all workers and their families and supporters.

“Specialist employment must offer real opportunities for skill-building and progression – not tokenism.”

WWDA calls for the Australian Government to develop and implement a national, time-bound strategy and framework for the closure of all ADEs and segregated models of employment, with support for workers to transition to open employment.

Disability-led design of transitional pathways and supports

The transition away from segregated employment must be planned and deliberate, with systems of support for workers to navigate the transition. WWDA supports the calls from Down Syndrome Australia and others for a transition plan that ensures no one is left behind, particularly those with high support needs who are often the most engaged in ADEs.²⁵ Currently, less than 1% of workers in ADEs transition to mainstream or open employment.²⁶ WWDA calls for comprehensive services and supports to transition people with disability from ADEs into open, inclusive and accessible forms of employment, ensuring equal remuneration for work of equal value, consistent with the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in its report on Australia.²⁷ During this transition, existing supported and segregated employment settings should be re-designed to provide transition pathways, inclusive of skill building and support systems.

WWDA also supports Inclusion Australia’s recommendation that existing ADEs be required to develop individualised employment plans for every worker to support their transition into open employment. These plans must be co-designed with the individual through supported decision-making processes. Individualised employment plans should identify the person’s goals, strengths, and support needs and outline a clear pathway to meaningful and fair work. This should also include opportunities and support for skill-building, career development, and progression into open employment.

Systems of support for families and supporters

The transition from segregated employment to open and inclusive workplaces can be complex, not only for women and gender-diverse people with disability but also for their families and supporters. The experiences of families and supporters was of particular relevance in WWDA community consultation on supported employment, reflecting the role that many women and gender diverse people with disability have as parents and/or carers of people with disability. The specific needs and experiences of people with disability who are parents or carers are often excluded

from national policy frameworks, but warrant attention. Families and supporters can play a critical role in enabling participation in employment. Some families and supporters have expressed concern about the impacts of a rapid closure of segregated workplaces without a broader system of supports for the transition.²⁸

“Whatever they make happen they have to make sure families are not worse off too. Don't shut it down and leave people with nothing in replacement. I know lots of people talk about closing it all down straight away, but you can't leave people with nothing, there has to be a plan. Otherwise people will be so alone and stuck in their homes. And for me, I wouldn't be able to work if she (my daughter) didn't have that job, so they have to think about the families too, because my job is the only thing keeping a roof over our heads.”

WWDA calls for support systems for people with disability and their families and supporters, including clear and accessible information to ensure understanding of available services and the pathway to open employment. Guidance on navigating new systems, accessing entitlements and advocating for rights will empower people with disability and their families and supporters during transition. People with disability and their families and supporters should also have access to ongoing support and flexible funding arrangements that enable sustainable employment participation and prevent crisis-driven responses.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 3: Phase out segregated employment, with comprehensive support for people with disability to transition into open employment. This includes by taking the following actions:

Recommendation 3.1: Deliberately design transitional pathways into open employment.

Recommendation 3.2: Mandate the development of individualised employment plans for all ADE workers during the transitional period, as recommended by Inclusion Australia.

Recommendation 3.3: Develop systems to support people with disability and their families and supporters with the transition from segregated employment.

Q3: What additional actions are needed to increase open/inclusive employment?

The shift to open and inclusive employment for all women and gender-diverse people with disability requires comprehensive and gender-responsive strategies and frameworks. Women with disability have the right to economic participation

and to an adequate standard of living, but continue to face multiple intersecting barriers that impede full inclusion.²⁹ This necessitates broad-reaching reform, including capacity-building for employers, reforms to legal frameworks, strong ecosystems of support, and measures to eliminate gender-specific barriers and discrimination. Targeted and specific policy measures are required to dismantle the structural inequality that persists for women and gender-diverse people with disability³⁰, consistent with the Australian Government's obligations under Article 6 of the CRPD.³¹ Article 6 requires States Parties to take specific measures to ensure women and girls with disability have full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.³² Having regard to gendered experiences within both segregated and open employment settings, including the prevalence of gender-based violence and harassment, the Australian Government must implement specific measures to address these issues.

"People with disability deserve equal rights, fair treatment, and full inclusion."

Address gender-based violence and abuse in the workplace

Women and gender-diverse people with disability disproportionately experience harassment, discrimination, violence and abuse in the workplace compared to their male or non-disabled peers.³³ For instance, the 5th National Survey on Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces found that 92% of women with disability had experienced sexual harassment, compared to 71% of men with disability.³⁴ In WWDA's 2025 Supported Employment Survey, which included 64 participants, 17% reported experiencing emotional, physical or sexual abuse by a supervisor, while 19% reported similar experiences from other workers. Additionally, 6.25% of respondents disclosed experiences of sexual harassment.

Many women with disability in segregated settings face significant barriers to accessing reporting and support services, police and legal assistance, and advocacy.³⁵ Additionally, women with disability may be socialised or compelled to tolerate higher levels of mistreatment, violence, abuse, exploitation, and neglect as part of the service delivery they receive.³⁶ Women and gender-diverse people with disability have repeatedly highlighted the need for safe, accessible and responsive systems to report harassment, discrimination and abuse in the workplace, including in segregated employment settings. In WWDA's 2025 Supported Employment Survey, 68.75% of respondents indicated they wanted advocacy and support with work-related problems.

"There needs to be someone who can help us if people are being mean or hurting us because nobody does now. I wanted to tell someone but my friend said nobody would believe us."

WWDA calls for specialised services to support women and gender-diverse people with disability who have experienced or are experiencing gender-based violence and discrimination in the workplace. These support services should include psychological, employment, legal and advocacy support. WWDA also urges the Australian Government to enact reforms to safety and anti-discrimination laws to ensure they are fit for purpose in preventing and responding to gender and disability-based violence and discrimination in the workplace.

Support flexible, inclusive and accessible work

Flexible, inclusive and accessible workplaces and workplace practices are critical for enabling the full participation of women and gender-diverse people with disability in the workforce. Flexible practices, such as part-time roles, job sharing and remote or hybrid working arrangements, allow people to manage fluctuating health conditions, care responsibilities and support needs that may limit their ability to work within traditional hours or environments. When embedded as core principles, rather than treated as optional extras, flexible and accessible work arrangements support productivity, foster inclusion, and promote healthier workplaces. Importantly, flexible work must be built into systems and mandated in open employment settings, rather than being something people must fight for.

“We deserve flexibility and access supports built-in – not things we have to fight for.”

Employers have legal obligations to provide accessible workplaces, but many WWDA members report that they continue to face systemic barriers due to discriminatory practices or a lack of disability awareness. In WWDA’s 2025 Supported Employment Survey, 75% of respondents stated that they wanted to see help for employers to better understand disability as part of a broader plan to improve access to open employment. Survey respondents also indicated strong demand for flexible arrangements (79.17%), inclusive and welcoming workplaces (72.92%), employer education (68.75%) and assistive technology (56.25%). These practices are particularly important for women and gender-diverse people with intellectual disability or complex support needs.

“Culturally safe, trauma-informed workplaces with understanding that disability is not static and it changes; flexibility to do the job, accommodating the needs, is important. Give us an opportunity to show our strengths and we can do better.”

In this context, WWDA supports the Government’s recent commitment to reforming and strengthening the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA), following recommendations from the DRC. For many years, WWDA has highlighted that the DDA has become ineffective in preventing and addressing disability discrimination,

including denial of reasonable accommodations. WWDA calls for the strengthening of legislative frameworks, including by addressing the operation of exceptions (such as exceptions related to “unjustifiable hardship”). The DDA must be reformed, including to require employers to take positive steps to eliminate discrimination, and to ensure people with disability can effectively make complaints about discrimination and the denial of reasonable accommodation, and access redress.³⁷

“The law must stop employers from using “unjustifiable hardship” as an excuse to deny reasonable adjustments. Everyone deserves fair treatment, support, and the right to work. The law must be changed to hold employers fully accountable for providing reasonable adjustments. There should be no more excuses.”

Provide training, mentoring and support for both employers and women and gender-diverse people to gain and keep employment

Ensuring women and gender-diverse people with disability can access and sustain meaningful employment requires tailored, strengths-based and rights-focused training, mentoring and support systems for both employers and individuals.

“People with disability add important perspectives to workplaces and that should be celebrated. Mainstream employers and workplaces would benefit from having disabled employees because of the increased representation, development of more accepting culture, and varied worldviews and skills.”

With the introduction of Inclusive Employment Australia (IEA), there is an opportunity to transform disability employment into a rights-based, inclusive system and prioritise accessibility, individual choice and ongoing support. WWDA supports the recommendations of Inclusion Australia and Down Syndrome Australia in relation to the IEA, and calls for accessible mechanisms for participation and engagement; provision of ongoing individualised support; the embedding of supported decision-making principles; consistency across regulatory mechanisms; and alignment with the CRPD.

“I want people to know that I can do the job if I get the chance and I can have the help I need.”

The Australian Government must also ensure the provision of appropriate and consistent funding for disability supports (including support workers and specialist providers), ensuring individuals can access the supports they need to succeed in their chosen roles. These supports may include on the job coaching, advocacy to address workplace harassment, and training for employers to make necessary workplace adjustments that are meaningful and useful.

“Funding to pay support workers and any other ppl [with] expertise so I can buy the support I need to arrange a great job and help train the employer to know how to make adjustments that are actually useful.”

While WWDA supports strategies that develop the “employment skills, experience and confidence” of women and girls with disability, it must be acknowledged that such programs treat the symptoms of low workforce participation rates, not the cause. People with disability do not need “fixing” and should not feel pressure to change their behaviour, or hide their disability, to fit the “abled-bodied” stereotype of a desirable employee.³⁸ The Australian Government must invest in capacity-building for employers to promote inclusive workplaces.

Reform the Disability Support Pension

Comprehensive reform of the Disability Support Pension (DSP) is also a critical step to support economic security and open and inclusive employment opportunities for people with disability. People with disability are often forced into low-wage, segregated employment due to the design of income support systems, including the DSP. The current design of the DSP penalises those who work through restrictive income thresholds and taper rates. This has particular impacts on women with disability, who bear a disproportionate burden of poverty and are amongst the poorest of all groups in society. The concern of losing income support acts as a significant barrier to seeking alternative employment, or leaving harmful workplaces. Reforming the DSP would not only promote economic security, but also empower women and gender-diverse people with disability to leave unsafe, exploitative or abusive workplaces without fear of financial destitution.

“I don't want to work at my work any more but nobody else will give me a job because they think I can't do anything. But I am sick of not having enough money and not being able to get a job anywhere else. And I don't think I should have to go to work with anyone who hurts me or is mean.”

WWDA calls for a comprehensive reform of the DSP to ensure it provides economic security, dignity and choice for women and gender-diverse people with disability. This includes removing punitive income tests that create disincentives to work, enabling recipients to earn a fair and liveable income without fear of losing their DSP. The DSP should be redesigned to function as a true safety net that supports people to engage in meaningful employment. Any reform of the DSP must also be gender-responsive. For example, the operation of the partner income test within the DSP system disproportionately impacts women and gender-diverse people with disability, undermining economic autonomy. For people in unsafe or coercive relationships, the inability to access independent income acts as a barrier to leaving and reinforces systemic inequalities. Reforming the DSP must include a gender-

responsive review of eligibility requirements to ensure equitable access to income support that upholds the safety, autonomy, and economic security for all people with disability.³⁹

To ensure the DSP supports economic inclusion and safety, reforms must be co-designed with women and gender-diverse people with disability. Reforms should include:

- Raising the income threshold and reducing the taper rate so people can retain more of what they earn.
- Allowing people to retain DSP eligibility for longer periods while working, to support transition into open employment.
- Include a gender-responsive review of eligibility settings, including the partner income test.

Embed lived experience and co-design in design and delivery

Critically, employment and broader reforms must be led, governed and informed by people with disability. This is consistent with Australia's obligations under Article 4 of the CRPD⁴⁰, which requires States Parties to actively involve people with disability, including through their representative organisations, in implementation of the Convention and decision-making processes concerning issues related to people with disability. Traditional systems have often failed to adequately address the specific and diverse needs of people with disability, particularly women and gender-diverse people. Embedding co-design in every stage of policy, program and service design, development, implementation, and oversight ensures that solutions are grounded in lived experience and informed by a deep, nuanced understanding of the barriers and aspirations of women and gender-diverse people with disability.⁴¹

"We want to use our lived experience to change systems through advocacy and policy."

"Most importantly, lived experience must lead the change."

This approach recognises the diversity within the disability community and ensures women and gender-diverse people with disability shape the systems and services that directly impact their lives. Disability led co-design fosters ownership, trust, and authenticity and increases the likelihood of effective and sustainable reforms that genuinely meet the needs and uphold the rights of people with disability.

"Mandate accessibility requirements, embed lived experience roles, and pay those roles fairly."

WWDA calls for all elements of employment reform to be conducted in co-design with women and gender-diverse people with disability. Specifically, this may include:

- Development of a co-design framework;
- Establishment of a Lived Experience Advisory Group; and
- Implementation of co-design in governance structure, overseeing the activities listed in Appendix 3.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 4: Address gender-based violence and abuse in the workplace.

Recommendation 5: Support flexible, inclusive and accessible work options and practices.

Recommendation 6: Provide training, mentoring and support for employers and for women and gender-diverse people to gain and keep employment.

Recommendation 7: Reform the Disability Support Pension.

Recommendation 8: Embed lived experience and co-design in all aspects of supported employment reform (including design and delivery).

Q4: What would you like to see in a roadmap for reform?

The national roadmap for supported employment reform must be inclusive, gender responsive, and co-designed with people with disability, including women and gender-diverse people with disability who face some of the poorest employment outcomes in Australia. Reform must address the systemic discrimination that pushes women with disability into low-paid, segregated and insecure work. It must ensure safe, accessible and meaningful employment pathways. In addition to the recommendations above, we recommend that the roadmap prioritise the following key actions:

Set disaggregated employment targets

The roadmap must include measurable targets for the employment of people with disability, and specifically people with intellectual disability, disaggregated by gender, age and other relevant characteristics across the public sector. This is consistent with the national Disability Representative Organisations' *Economic Justice for People with Disability: A National Blueprint (Economic Justice Blueprint)*,⁴² which recommends:

- Setting a 15% disability employment target for the public sector with specific targets for marginalised people with disability; and

- Ensuring a minimum of 3% of roles within the public sector disability employment target are designated specifically for, and filled by, people with an intellectual disability.⁴³

Increasing the employment of people with disability in the public sector, and introducing incentives for private sector employers, is also consistent with the recommendations of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery. As the Special Rapporteur wrote in the 2024 statement on his visit to Australia: “The Federal and state/territorial Governments should also actively promote the employment of persons with disabilities in the open market. In this regard, they should consider temporary special measures, including incentives such as tax credits or wage subsidies in order to encourage employers to hire persons with disabilities proactively. There is also much scope to increase employment in the public sector”.⁴⁴ Additionally, the CRPD Committee in its General Comment No. 8 on the right of persons with disabilities to work and employment has recommended affirmative action to promote the employment of people with disability and particularly women, in open employment settings.⁴⁵

Women and gender-diverse people with disability must also be visible in employment data to ensure that reforms are equitable and responsive, and to promote accountability. As Disability Representative Organisations have set out in the Economic Justice Blueprint, the Australian Government must require employers with 100+ staff to track and report disability employment figures, similar to the existing requirements under the Workplace Gender Equality Act.⁴⁶ Under Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD), the Australian Government is required to collect appropriate statistical and research data, disaggregate it where relevant (including by gender), and ensure that this information is used to evaluate the implementation of the CRPD.⁴⁷ However, there remains a significant gap in the availability of disaggregated and intersectional data on disability in Australia. An intersectional evidence base is essential to inform specific measures that improve workforce participation and economic security for women and gender diverse people with disability.⁴⁸

Embed supported decision making across all employment supports

WWDA calls for the principles of supported decision-making to be embedded across employment reforms. Supported decision making is essential to realising the rights of women and gender diverse people with disability to live free from violence, to access meaningful work, and to make decisions that reflect their full personhood and identity⁴⁹, including throughout employment.⁵⁰ The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) General Comment No. 18 clarifies that the right to work includes access to – *decent work* – employment that encompasses adequate remuneration, and conditions of safety alongside

respecting the physical and mental integrity of the worker.⁵¹ Employment supports which override individual decision making or disregard a person's goals and safety fundamentally fail to reach this standard. Article 12 of the CRPD affirms that all people with disability have the right to legal capacity on an equal basis with others and are entitled to the support they may require in exercising that capacity. This obligation is reinforced by the general principles of the CRPD, including respect for autonomy, non-discrimination, and full and effective participation in society⁵², which should be embedded across the roadmap for reform.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 9: Set disaggregated employment targets for people with disability, including specific targets for employing people with intellectual disability.

Recommendation 10: Embed supported decision making across all employment supports and reforms.

Recommendation 11: Provide and promote tailored and individualised supports for people with disability to access open employment.

Conclusion

The right to paid work is a fundamental human right, recognised in the seven core international human rights treaties to which Australia is a signatory.⁵³ Article 27 of the CRPD specifically recognises the right of people with disability to work in an open, inclusive, and accessible labour market, free from discrimination.⁵⁴ In order to comply with its obligations under international human rights law, the Australian Government must take concrete steps to end segregation and discrimination in the context of employment, support flexible and accessible work options, and provide systems of individualised support, training and mentoring. Reforming the supported employment sector is a critical opportunity to uphold the rights, safety and economic participation of women and gender-diverse people with disability in Australia. The Australian Government has the opportunity to lead by example by creating a fair, inclusive and equitable employment system for people with disability.

This submission has outlined practical rights-based reforms grounded in lived experience, calling for an end to subminimum wages and segregated employment models, which devalue the contributions of people with disability, perpetuate poverty and inequality, isolate people with disability from the broader community and limit employment pathways. To ensure no one is left behind, the submission calls for comprehensive services and systems that support people with disability (and their families and supporters) during this transition. It also recommends

broader system reforms to promote economic security and open and inclusive employment for people with disability. Finally, this submission underscores the need to address systemic gender inequality and intersectional barriers that disproportionately affect women and gender-diverse people with disability in the context of employment.

"I don't want to just survive, I want to thrive."

Appendix 1: Voice of women and gender-diverse people with disability

Purpose and structure

This appendix supplements the submission made by WWDA to the *Next Steps in Supported Employment: Consultation on the way forward*, presenting insights and lived experience from members of our organisation. In support of the information presented in the discussion paper for this consultation, this material provides a snapshot of experiences from our members, across a range of ages, backgrounds, and geographic locations.

Comments and responses from members are presented to illustrate the experiences of women and gender-diverse people with disability in employment, including ADEs and supported employment environments.

Methods

Data collection

An online survey was developed based on the questions presented in the Discussion Paper, containing a mixture of demographic, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions to elicit both quantitative and qualitative responses. The survey was prepared and administered via the Survey Monkey platform, which also facilitated data collection.

Participant recruitment

Convenience sampling was utilised to recruit survey participants. Members of WWDA were contacted directly via email and provided with a link to the survey. They were provided with information on how WWDA will use their information and feedback. Participants were informed that completing the survey was voluntary. They were also offered assistance to complete the survey verbally if desired. 64 responses were received.

Limitations

The goal of the survey was to capture qualitative responses to inform and contextualise our recommendations and the evidence presented. WWDA acknowledges that these views do not represent all women and gender-diverse people with disability who have worked or are working in supported employment environments.

Respondents' demographic profile

The WWDA Supported Employment Survey received responses from 64 participants. Of these, 51 identified as a woman or gender-diverse person with disability, reflecting the primary focus of WWDA's work. 42 respondents reported

living with one or more chronic health conditions, and 29 identified as LGBTQIA+SB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and other marginalised genders and sexualities, including Sistergirl and Brotherboy). Eleven participants identified as having complex support needs, and an equal number reported living in a rural or remote area.

The age distribution of respondents highlighted a diverse cross-section of adult life stages among women and gender-diverse people with disability engaged in supported employment. The majority of participants fell within the 25–64 age range. Specifically, 23.44% (15 respondents each) were aged 25–34, 35–44, and 55–64. A further 20.31% (13 respondents) were aged 45–54. Younger adults were less represented, with only 6.25% (4 respondents) aged 18–24. Just 3.13% (2 respondents) were aged 65 and over.

Member insights

Q4: Have you had any of these experiences with supported employment?

- **As an employee:** 14 respondents (29.17%)
- **As a supervisor within a supported employment provider organisation:** 0 respondents. (0.00%)
- **A family member, friend or someone I provide care for works in a supported employment organisation:** 7 respondents (14.58%)
- **As a peer or individual advocate for anyone working in supported employment:** 8 respondents (16.67%)
- **As an advisor, systemic advocate or policymaker for the supported employment sector:** 3 respondents (6.25%)
- **I have no direct experience but have knowledge of the sector:** 11 respondents (22.92%)
- **No experience:** 17 respondents (35.42%)
- **Prefer not to answer:** 0 respondents (0.00%)

2 respondents commented:

- "As a recipient of aged care package managed by me"
- "NDIS planner"

Q5: If you have experience working in an Australian Disability Enterprise, how satisfied are you with the wages you received?

- **Very satisfied:** 1 respondent (2.08%)
- **Satisfied:** 3 respondents (6.25%)
- **Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied:** 2 respondents (4.17%)
- **Dissatisfied:** 4 respondents (8.33%)
- **Very dissatisfied:** 7 respondents (14.58%)

- **Not applicable:** 29 respondents (60.42%)
- **Prefer not to answer:** 2 respondents (4.17%)

Q6: Have you experienced challenges or barriers in supported employment? (Tick all that apply)

- **I have not experienced any challenges or barriers:** 8 respondents (16.67%)
- **Feeling isolated or separated from the wider community:** 12 respondents (25.00%)
- **Being paid very low wages:** 13 respondents (27.08%)
- **Work that feels boring or not meaningful:** 12 respondents (25.00%)
- **Abuse or mistreatment by a supervisor (emotional, physical or sexual):** 8 respondents (16.67%)
- **Abuse or mistreatment by other workers (emotional, physical or sexual):** 9 respondents (18.75%)
- **Sexual harassment:** 3 respondents (6.25%)
- **Discrimination based on gender, sexuality, disability or other personal characteristics:** 15 respondents (31.25%)
- **Prefer not to answer:** 8 respondents (16.67%)
- **Other (please specify):** 11 respondents (22.92%)

7 respondents commented:

- "I've not been in supported employment"
- "No wages"
- "Put unpaid leave for extended for 5 months then put reasonable adjustments in Health care field"
- "Not experienced but have seen"
- "No experience directly"
- "Supported with parking space"
- "Not qualified to use disability employment agencies as not ndis funded nor on disability pension"

Q7: Do you think there should still be workplaces just for people with disability (supported employment) in the future?

- **Yes:** 18 respondents (37.50%)
- **No:** 15 respondents (31.25%)
- **Not sure:** 12 respondents (25.00%)
- **Prefer not to answer:** 3 respondents (6.25%)

Q8: What type of job would you like in the future?

- **Supported employment (workplaces specifically for people with high support needs):** 7 respondents (14.58%)
- **Open employment (a mainstream job with ordinary considerations for reasonable adjustments):** 31 respondents (64.58%)
- **Open employment (a mainstream job with more help):** 26 respondents (54.17%)
- **Self-employment (your own business):** 15 respondents (31.25%)
- **I am not sure:** 1 respondent (2.08%)
- **Prefer not to answer:** 3 respondents (6.25%)

Q9: What would you like to see in a plan to help people with disability move to open employment?

- **More training and skills:** 24 respondents (50.00%)
- **Support to try new jobs:** 28 respondents (58.33%)
- **Help for employers to understand disability:** 36 respondents (75.00%)
- **Support to keep my job:** 28 respondents (58.33%)
- **Prefer not to answer:** 2 respondents (4.17%)
- **Other (please specify):** 5 respondents (10.42%)

5 respondents commented:

- "I want people to know that I can do the job if I get the chance and I can have the help I need. There needs to be someone who can help us if people are being mean or hurting us because nobody does now. I wanted to tell someone but my friend said nobody would believe us."
- "Funding to pay support workers and any other [people with] expertise so I can buy the support I need to arrange a great job and help train the employer to know how to make adjustment that are actually useful."
- "Make employer accountable to do the reasonable adjustments"
- "A program that requires profits made from [people with disability] to go into their training with the understanding that supported employment is a step on the path to open employment."
- "Training and support to be placed in an identified role."

Q10: What would help more women and gender-diverse people with intellectual disability and/or complex support needs enter open employment?

- **Free training to build job skills:** 26 respondents (54.17%)
- **Paid work experience or placements:** 37 respondents (77.08%)
- **Support to start or run your own small business:** 25 respondents (52.08%)
- **Help finding work in a social enterprise:** 19 respondents (39.58%)
- **Help looking for a job in open employment:** 24 respondents (50.00%)

- **Advocacy and support with work-related problems:** 33 respondents (68.75%)
- **Information about your rights at work:** 20 respondents (41.67%)
- **Information about different job and employment options:** 21 respondents (43.75%)
- **Help connecting with employers who are hiring:** 28 respondents (58.33%)
- **Education for employers about hiring women and gender diverse people with disability:** 33 respondents (68.75%)
- **Flexible work hours and arrangements:** 38 respondents (79.17%)
- **Support or mentoring in the workplace:** 27 respondents (56.25%)
- **Accessible transport to get to and from work:** 26 respondents (54.17%)
- **Assistive technology or tools:** 27 respondents (56.25%)
- **Inclusive and welcoming workplaces:** 35 respondents (72.92%)
- **Prefer not to answer:** 3 respondents (6.25%)
- **Other (please specify):** 4 respondents (8.33%)

4 Respondents commented:

- "End the Ableism in Health care field and have more workers with hidden disabilities"
- "Greater public acceptance (not awareness) of people with disability"
- "The legal requirement to put a percentage of profits back into these requirements"
- "Culturally safe, trauma informed work places with understanding that disability is not static and it changes; flexibility to do the job accommodating the needs is important. Give us an opportunity to show our strengths and we can do better."

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