

# YWCA Submission:

## Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability

### Disability Employment Issues Paper Response

August 2020



**“It starts before we even get into the job...If your place is not physically accessible, you just can’t employ me. And there’s nothing concrete being done to fix that”**

**- Y Connect Member**

**“I believe having individualised suitable support when I won a position would have been so much better with a more positive outcome”**

**- Y Connect Member**

**“As a woman, whenever I would advocate for my rights in the workplace, around my disability, I was dismissed with gendered terms like ‘bossy’”**

**- Y Connect Member**

## Our background

### About YWCA Australia

YWCA Australia is an evolving intersectional feminist organisation working towards a future where all women and girls are safe and respected with equal access to power, opportunity and resources. YWCA Australia is part of World YWCA, a global membership movement of women and young women who have been leading social and economic change in 125 countries, for over 150 years. YWCAs around the world have a strong history of advocating for gender equality in all its forms as part of our commitment to the full realisation of the human rights of women, young women and girls.

YWCA Australia undertakes advocacy and delivers programs and services that develop the leadership and collective power of women, young women and girls; support individuals, their families and communities at critical times; and promotes gender equality to strengthen communities across Australia's diverse social and geographic landscape. YWCA Australia has been providing invaluable community services for over a century, with a presence in Adelaide since 1880.

### About the Y Connect Project

*"The glass ceiling is double glazed when it comes to being a woman with a disability."*

*- Y Connect Member*

YWCA Australia run the Y Connect project in Adelaide, South Australia. The aim of the project is to support women with disabilities through building confidence, connections and professional development. The project supports those looking to begin or build career steps by offering connections with peers and the YWCA movement's network, broadening skills or confidence in skills and supporting women with their personal professional goals.

Y Connect recognises that career planning, networking and skill-building present additional barriers for women with disabilities and aims to create a safe and empowering community; offering workshops, events, social and mentoring opportunities for women at different stages of their careers.

Y Connect is supported by a community of allies, where women come together with the common goal of changing the culture and statistics around opportunities for women with disabilities.

Participation in Y Connect is completely voluntary and not tied to any other supports for its members. Members are able to tailor their journeys and opt into whichever events and activities that find interesting and relevant for their career development.

*"It's been very rewarding to come to Y Connect because... I guess I've put another feather in my cap. I've met all these great people. And feel like I can give them something and they can give me something."*

*Y Connect Member*

## Our position - a gender-responsive approach to improving employment for people with disability

YWCA Australia recognises that the rate at which women experience discrimination is significantly increased for women with disabilities. As outlined by Women with Disabilities Australia:

*“Women with disability in Australia have less power and fewer resources than other women and men. They are much more likely to live in poverty than people in the general population; have to work harder to secure their livelihoods; have less control over income and assets and have little economic security. They are much more likely to be unemployed than other women and men with disability; less likely to be in the paid workforce; have lower incomes from employment; are more likely to experience gender and disability biases in labour markets; and are more concentrated than other women and men in precarious, informal, subsistence and vulnerable employment.”<sup>1</sup>*

Securing employment for women with disabilities is a significant challenge that, once overcome, provides not just financial stability but also has a flow on effect of better quality of life, more access to opportunities and increased self-worth.

YWCA saw an opportunity for their network of established, motivated and progressive women to become proactive allies through a project focusing on employment, targeted at women with disabilities. Furthermore, the lessons learnt through the project directly contribute to the evolution of YWCA as a more accessible organisation that is welcoming to and advocating for women with disabilities. Y Connect was established in July of 2017 with a funding grant from Julia Farr MS McLeod Benevolent.

The project is currently funded by a NDIA ILC grant until November 2020, and staffed by two employees, one of whom is a woman with disability. Recently the YWCA was successful with funding to launch the Y Connect Project in Toowoomba, Queensland.

**YWCA Australia advocates that the Disability Royal Commission consider initiatives and policies that take a gender-responsive approach and support all women and non-binary people with disability to gain meaningful and long-lasting employment in Australia.**

For more information about this submission please contact [info@ywca.org.au](mailto:info@ywca.org.au).

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<sup>1</sup> Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA), 2018. The Status of Women and Girls with Disability in Australia (2018). WWDA: Hobart, Tasmania.

## Submission

This submission has been written by members of the Y Connect Project. Together, this group of members who have shared their journeys and the project firsthand, with lived experiences of discrimination and exclusion from the mainstream Australian workforce and ongoing challenges with employment. This submission is our experiences as a collective and combined our voices are stronger together.

With an age range from 24 – 59, Jane, Bridgett, Belle, Jae, Annette and Hannah all contributed to this submission. They are all participants of the NDIS. One of the contributors lives in regional South Australia, with the rest of responders located in the CBD of Adelaide and surrounding suburbs.

We asked the members the questions outlined in the employment issues paper and this is what was shared in their own words.

### **How do people with disability experience violence, abuse, neglect and/or exploitation in employment settings?**

“It starts before we even get into the job. It’s the most important to know that far too many buildings and places of employment are just not accessible, so we’re instantly ruled out of a huge chunk of potential jobs. If your place is not physically accessible, you just can’t employ me. And there’s nothing concrete being done to fix that. Being excluded from more places than people even realise is neglect and it should be framed that way. Neglect by government and society.”

“Then there’s the fact that the recruitment process is extremely ableist. The very first job interview I ever had, I was 15 and my high school peers were all getting part time jobs. And as soon as they saw I had a disability, all of a sudden the job didn’t exist anymore. That’s a common thing but as a first experience, as a teenager it shapes your self-worth and career ambitions from the start.

I have had job interviews where the interviewer has used their position of power in that situation to spend the whole time asking personal questions about my disability and I know in the moment, I’m not getting that job. I can say that the questions are inappropriate or refuse to answer but then I won’t get the job anyway. I spent the entire time trying to redirect to my skills and talents but I just couldn’t. He didn’t come from a place of trying to be upsetting, it was just a novelty to him and he was curious, but there’s so much education needed for literally everyone to normalize disability so we’re not having these conversations over and over in life and in interviews. Another interview I got, was about fundraising. I have skills in a certain area but as soon as they saw me they tried to tell me I could fundraise for the Paralympics even though I have no interest in sport like that and no experience in the area. It’s the assumption that disabled people should stay in disabled spaces.

A barrier that comes up frequently in the recruitment process is the need for a drivers license even if the job does not require driving. It’s often used as a marker of reliability, when this shouldn’t be the case. I recently got my license but many people can’t, even though they do have regular, reliable transport and are able to do the job as well as anyone else. It’s irrelevant.

I’ve been in a casual position before where they hired me and after the fact realised that a good portion of the work, I was unable to do. So they didn’t fire me, but I couldn’t get the same amount of work as everyone else. They just didn’t think beforehand that what they were asking me to do would be impossible. They hadn’t actually considered the accessibility of the job and the space at all. When I raised it with them, they told me they’d never considered it, but they didn’t do anything to change it.

The last point I want to make here is the huge amount of unpaid work that is expected of disabled people. In an

advocacy way, in a consulting way. We're expected to do the work and make profitable businesses more profitable by making them accessible and getting them new customers or similar, but we're not paid for it. There's never budget for it. It doesn't lead to work, it leads to more unpaid work."

"In my personal experience the discriminatory practice in the community service sector, that I have worked in, as well as administration jobs, that I have had earlier in my career is absolutely astounding. There is a lot of 'saying the right words and implementation of', what people would deem, the correct phrases but what happens in practice is a very different landscape entirely. I am lucky that at the moment I work for an organisation that supports me in the best way it can. But, it has taken me a long time to find an organisation that is willing to even give me a try despite my experience or my knowledge. The first thing people see is the insurance risk and all the things I can't do, or the amount of adjustments, physical or otherwise, to make the workplace accessible. Finally, if you do find a place to work you have limitations like any other employee only yours are more obvious. For example, I'm super conscious that I have to work extra hard to prove myself as a worthwhile employee because a lot of the time, as an individual, I cost the company more money and more time to employ. I also feel I need to work hard at making people look further than my physical deficits therefore, my skills and knowledge must be enough to out weigh my physical challenges to make me worth employing. It is also very important to note how limiting a number of jobs are for people with disabilities, for example, most young people would gain several customer service jobs whether it be in retail or hospitality but for someone like myself those jobs are not accessible. I require a set schedule to function, I can't just wake up in the morning with 3 hours to spare, jump in the car and get to work. This limits my earning potential. When you eventually do get that one job, you have worked really hard to get passed all the discrimination and regular things, like interviews, that regular people go through. You have one income stream, whereas many people have the option of having multiple or more hours. This is not a possibility for me as I suffer from something akin to chronic fatigue, not being able to work for as long as others can, e.g: a 4hr shift is about the most I can manage for one day."

"When I walked into an interview I felt like they crossed me off, as I do not walk well. When I was asked questions, I needed more time to go away and compile answers, as straight there and then was too hard. When I was employed, I had little or no supervision in being a financial counsellor as I was a registered nurse before my disability. My 14 year old daughter, was working at McDonalds and earning more per hour than me, It was a huge drop in pay, satisfaction, responsibility getting a new job. Once my government supplementary income was stopped, then my contract was not renewed."

"Most obviously, through discrimination, both overt and covert. This means that we are often not active participants in decisions and discussions about our abilities or how we can fit into a team, and we are excluded by concerns such as the built environment, people's perceptions of our abilities, and also through lack of flexibility for us to balance our disability needs and our work duties. This often leads to our employment being at risk, or being excluded from employment opportunities."

### **What barriers exist for people with disability in finding and keeping a job?**

"Education for the first part. Education is not accessible enough and that then impacts people's life chances, confidence and self-belief. Especially universities. They have a long way to go. You can't reach your chosen job if the pathways to getting there are blocked... I studied psychology and the teaching on disability wasn't great. The tutor at one point was talking about cost benefit being applied to disabled people's lives and using an example and saying that doesn't happen anymore and I brought up example of where it does and they just deflected away from it and implied I was talking too much. It's attitudinal in education as well as physical access. There was also really an 'us and them' attitude in my study field. Like you couldn't treat mental health issues if you ever experienced

them. Mental health is so important for people with disability – we need to also be the practitioners. Disclosure and asking for adjustments are huge barriers. No one is taught when or how to disclose, there's no right answer. We're sometimes taught we don't have to disclose, but for me that isn't an option. There needs to be standardized ways we can do this and ask for what we need to do the job. And employers need to know how to respond to that appropriately. We need to normalize it and the experience of being disabled in the workplace. It's still too much of a novelty for some people with no experience of disability and it means that every person with a disability that tries to make inroads has to be putting in so much more effort, doing more work to educate and make a trail for those that come after them. It's almost another full-time job on top of everything else. When I've asked for accommodations in the past and been offered them, I still got the sense that they did it because they had to."

"The rigid structure of the working environment might not exist in theory anymore, but there are still certain expectations that make working with a disability challenging. E.g., I worked in a very fast pace administration role that even though my managers knew I wasn't able to function at the same rate and produce as fast without my technologies, they still expected me to maintain the same pace as an able bodied colleague. It is also worth mentioning that no matter how clear you are with your line managers about what limitations you have, what technologies you need, there is absolutely no guarantee that they will be able to understand or be willing to understand what that looks like in practice. This in turn then makes you, the employee, look incompetent in comparison to everyone else in your team who is able to achieve, and you are not. It's the equivalent of being asked to write with your hands tied behind your back even though you have been honest and they are aware."

"My abilities have changed a lot and I found it so hard taking such a BIG hit from being a registered Nurse, as that is all I knew. I did not get enough of the right supports, not that I knew what they were and when asked how I was going and I would say fine but I was really not sure as I was getting no feedback from above. When I started working, the person who was supposed to train me had resigned, so I had a different person coming down from Pt Pirie on all three days I worked. I cried a lot as I applied for lots and lots of jobs, but was knocked back so much. My job helper knew that after trying to get a job for three years, I was eligible for the Disability Support Pension so encouraged me to seek the 'Disability Support Pension'. I believe my job helper knew that I was unemployable, but the rules say that I had to try and get a job for 3 years. So kept seeing me getting more and more depressed by the day, which was very unhelpful while I was trying to be a good mum, on my own, for my two children. Now I hear one of my children telling me that they had an awful upbringing."

"Mostly perceptions about our abilities and also decisions being made about how we will or could fit in a work environment setting. I would also like to mention that the wage subsidy scheme inadvertently causes unstable employment for WWD. Many businesses take up the opportunity to provide employment for PWD while their wages are highly subsidised, but then many businesses find themselves unable to sustain that employment past the wage subsidy period. I believe there needs to be better protections or expectations set at the start of the contract so that this does not happen. Otherwise it is effectively creating false employment if it does not increase the long-term employment of a person, which is its purpose."

### **What helps people with disability find and keep a job in an environment free of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation?**

"Physical spaces is such a big one. Too many employers and employees don't even really know what they're being asked, if they get asked if their building is accessible. People would say it is accessible but in a previous workplace even, I had to call for entry through an alternative entrance that was locked- no one else had to make a phone call every time they wanted to get into the building. I went in to work through the same door where the trash got

taken out. I had to make the call from by the dumpsters, it wasn't seen as an issue by everyone else, but it was. They'd say – 'We can't change it, there is no possible way.' So the fact I could even get inside, it was just seen as good enough."

"If you know people who are hiring you're more likely to find work, people with disabilities have less connections generally. Less opportunities to network and be in front of people who are making those decisions."

"Understanding is the main thing that assists. I'm not asking every individual in every corporation to have an in depth understanding of how my disability affects my work, what I am asking is for people to understand that my brain simply functions differently from what yours does and I use different approaches and technologies to assist me. If people are open minded enough to understand that, the workplace would be easier for everyone to access not just disabled people. Communication and listening is also key. I need people to listen and actively consider what I am telling them. There is only so many times I can explain in so many different ways to make sure that people understand. Sometimes it's not just my responsibility as the person with the disability to educate and inform but also the systems job to establish what isn't working and have an open line with everybody."

"I believe having individualised suitable support when I won a position would have been so much better with a more positive outcome"

"Awareness, understanding, and having trusted allies in the workplace that can support a person to navigate any misunderstandings or conflicts. It is also important that employers understand their obligations within the systems of employing a PWD, and what constitutes discrimination, even unintentional, in the modern work context."

### **What opportunities are there for career progression for people with disability in Australian workplaces?**

"Not enough, honestly. There are pervasive beliefs that once a person with a disability is in a job, the problem is solved. Entry level is fine for entering the workforce but it's not and shouldn't be the end goal for people with disability because other people can't see them in positions of leadership. There needs to be proper support for professional development. It might be controversial, but I do believe in quotas and not just for people with disability in the organization, but for them getting promotions and advancing their careers.

I came up against barriers to advance my career that were also just barriers in society. For example, I would like to get into public health, and an opportunity came up to get some experience in a remote area. I wasn't considered for it because they said I would have to stay overnight, and they 'didn't think to ask if the accommodation would be accessible, so you can't come.'. Being excluded from things like this means that non-disabled people would have other extra stuff on their resume which I don't have- but not because I don't want to, because I'm physically excluded.

Also, when I was working in a not for profit in the past, when I'd arrive at work, people who worked at the same place but worked a different shift constantly assumed when they saw me that I was a client of the service and not that I worked there. There's that constant implication and assumption that you don't belong. Squashing someone's sense of belonging like that is going to keep them from staying in a role and therefore advancing."

"This is something that I feel is very difficult and very limiting because as I answered earlier it's not just a simple matter of jumping from job to job or in some cases, state to state, city to city, to go 'where the work is' as one of my mentors once said. Changing jobs and progressing in your career is not just about navigating the employment system individually. Each time you make a decision as an able-bodied person, to change jobs or shift, there are a hundred things that they don't need to think about that I need to consider. E.g. Am I going to be able to fit through the front door or the bathroom door; is there an accessible bathroom; if I need to be relocated is there

appropriate supports, accommodation in the new place; if my employer even considers me for that promotion, or is it too much work to think about all of these things. For me personally, the answer to that is: Yes. finding employment in the city which I currently live in and have lived in all of my life is too much of a challenge that relocating somewhere else is not an option, so my career progression is limited because of this. If there is a progression, would it mean I would need to work longer hours, do I have a manager that is understanding enough to respect my limitations.”

“I’m not sure as working in the country is so much different to working in the city. I never got a job that I could have moved up the ladder.”

“I am unsure. I do believe they are getting better, but I fear that the opening up of ‘disability’ positions, or the practice that many of us go for work in disability organisations, runs the risk of perpetuating the separation of ‘us and them’. It may not normalise disability in the workplace enough for us to be truly integrated. I do hope that this improves over time by just having our presence in society and eventually branching out more naturally.”

**What are the experiences of women with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse people (including migrants) with disability, and LGBTIQ people with disability in looking for, finding and keeping a job?**

“Being a queer woman with a disability has meant that I’ve had to navigate things differently and I feel like I’m often expected to pick one identity or facet of my life. When I advocate for things around accessibility within queer spaces, I will get some support but when I talk in disability spaces about being queer the response has been ‘we can’t deal with everything – you’re here to talk about disability’. I frequently feel like I’m only allowed to have one identity.”

“In my field, there are a lot of particularly religious organisations and I have had to change my resume to fit. Essentially I have a queer and a straight resume. When I was being taught about building resumes, and developing mine, the support I got, they didn’t have advice/know about whether I should disclose disability, whether I should take out some of my experience. They couldn’t give me advice. People didn’t acknowledge that I had different problems searching for work that didn’t fit their ideas. They didn’t know about disability and employment at all.”

“I have found, as a cis straight white woman, that I am often judged by potential employers very quickly when I walk into a job interview. My disability is visibly apparent, so immediately there are assumptions made about my ability — interestingly, mostly by men. I have had issues keeping jobs, but I believe that this is not wholly because of my disability. Employment in general is often of a casual or short-term basis, so this means that job security isn’t of a good standard in general. My disability is physical, so as long as I look for and find a job, I don’t have issues doing the tasks, although my health issues mean I can have unstable days. Many jobs won’t allow flexible starting times, so this means that if I have a bad morning, I will be recorded as late more often, and that will go against me in my ability to do my required job. Flexible — or later — starting times are a must, I believe.”

“As a woman, whenever I would advocate for my rights in the workplace, around my disability, I was dismissed with gendered terms like ‘bossy’.”

**What could be done to prevent, or respond to, discrimination, violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation against people with disability in the workplace? This could include better systems for support or making a complaint.**

“Educate other workers how to encourage a disabled person to become a better employee”

“Employers and people need to be more open to hearing about problems. If you hear about a problem, you can fix it. But if you don’t want to believe there is a problem – which too many don’t, then I can tell you something ten times and it will still not be deemed a problem if it isn’t a problem for them.”

“Sometimes I get rejected for a job and I know it’s my skill level or not the right fit.. but too often I know it’s because of my disability and what can I do? What can I prove? Nothing. There needs to be so much more work done, and again, I believe quotas have to be used to help here. Companies have shown they aren’t regulating or making the changes themselves so there have to be ways to make them accountable. We have to truly value disabled people and the contributions they make and pay them accordingly.”

“Mentoring is also really important – particularly with other successful people with disability, so we can see it, that it is possible. I have never worked with another disabled person (in other roles outside of disability specific panels), never seen another physically disabled person at university in my courses, building that community of you could actually do this.”

### **Are the current employment programs and supports for people with disability effective? If not, why not?**

“I have been with a Centrelink mandated employment agency since started university 7 years ago and have not got a job out of them or been helped in getting any of my jobs out of them. It’s not my resume, my cover letter or my interview skills, it’s the employers are not aware. Subsidies are a great thing but if no one knows how is that helpful.”

“The bar about what they think disabled people can do is so low. The reasons for people not getting a job are not addressed. There’s also not as much focus as I would like as what is actual meaningful employment for a disabled person. Where do you want to be in 10 years, 5 years’ time and how do we help you get there? Not just your first job, but your second and third. A lot of times I am told you need to take off all your education so you can try and get entry level roles.”

“Even the ‘Stepping Into’ program for people with disabilities – I get an email every year and every year nothing is in Adelaide, for me that doesn’t work, because I live in Adelaide and I would have to fly and pay for accommodation for an unpaid internship.”

“I also don’t like the fact that I go to these disability agencies and I haven’t seen anyone with disability working there. Some of the buildings aren’t even accessible! They can’t even meet the basics.”

“Not sure anymore as on Disability Support Pension and after having so many knock backs have given up.”

“Not always. As mentioned before, wage subsidy programs seem to benefit the employer in that they get an employee for 9 months at next to no cost to them, but that often leads to no long-term financial planning to enable that business to keep the person on. This means that once the subsidy contract finishes, so does the job.”

### **What changes should be made to these programs?**

“Focus is on the individual and not on the employment sector...When working with the individual and I tell you what I need, why can’t you give me that support. Talk to the employer, advocate for hiring people with disability. I need you to tell them about subsidies, I need you to tell them the benefits of hiring me or others. Why can’t they bring in the companies to do mock interviews, why can’t they be proactive engaging with employers? When I go to

Centrelink and say it isn't great support, they say I know, everyone says that. Have some metrics (better metrics) that say they aren't doing their job and stop paying for that."

"An idea would be for some sort of contracted expectation of continuing employment for x amount of months if the business is to be paid the subsidy. This would mean that the business would at least do some short term planning in their finances, which would then be easier to continue after this period."

### **What are employers' experiences of hiring and retaining workers with disability?**

"I am currently hiring someone for organization that I volunteer for. Having a disabled person on the hiring panel keeps other people accountable. We have put on the listing where the accessible info is, I put in the position description exactly where people need to go to enter the building for interview so they don't have to call and ask..."

### **Do you have any ideas for improving employment participation for people with disability? Do you have examples of good practice?**

"Proper wages for proper work. End sheltered employment. It perpetuates poverty"

"If education is starting at 14/15 for non-disabled people than that is where the info and programs need to start for disabled people as well."

"I am sick of telling people that I need an accessible entrance and the job magically disappears. So I asked for info on how to disclose. The recommendation was to frame it as 'despite my disability I can still do stuff' ... but it should be framed positively like 'because of my disability I have good time management'. How I was taught to frame it was it was a negative and I am coming from a place of deficit. It's so important we don't do this. If I frame myself, I don't want to frame myself as different to other disabled people. I want employers to know they can hire us all, not just me. We are educated, a lot of us have degrees, a lot of us have good experience. Don't throw other disabled people under the bus."

"How to frame it – is so important. I want to know how to do it in a culturally sensitive way to my community. I want other disabled people in the room."

"Yes. My current employer asked me in the interview if I needed to start later in the day because of my heart, and this has increased my rate of attendance at work because I am not forced to write off an entire day if I can't come in time. They also are very aware of the difference between cognitive and intellectual disability, so I am never made to feel stupid if I am having issues with memory and organisation. My workplace is very open with communication, and never assume about my abilities."

### **Is there anything else we should know?**

"Being the only disabled person in the room is a hard thing to do. We know we may not have disability allies in the room, especially if we don't have another disabled person in the room. It makes me less likely to speak up or it would be used against me."

"That we ALL have something to offer - and sometimes our real strength lies in our perceived weakness... when we become disabled we are called upon to show who we truly are. Prejudice is a soul destroying, weak stance that

ruins others lives. And NONE of us is immune to the challenge of disability at some stage in our lives. I SEEK a community of mutual respect - and sharing - for the common good.”

## Conclusion

YWCA Australia thanks the Royal Commission for the opportunity to provide a submission in response to the Employment Issues Paper, to shine light on a collective of voices of women with disabilities participating in Y Connect. We look forward to progressive and effective measures to follow.

To read more about the work of the Y Connect Project and YWCA Australia:  
<https://www.ywca.org.au/programs/mentoring-and-leadership/y-connect/>