Working with Women Alliance

Employment Services in Australia

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Acknowledgement

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA) acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future.

We value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who for thousands of years have preserved the culture and practices of their communities on country. This land was never surrendered, and we acknowledge that it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

We acknowledge that Australian governments have been complicit in the entrenched disadvantage, intergenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must lead the design and delivery of services that affect them for better life outcomes to be achieved.

About WwWA

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA) represents two key portfolios: National Women's Safety (NWS) and National Women's Equality (NWE).

The WwWA connects the critical areas of gender-based violence prevention and the advancement of women's economic equality and leadership, bridging these important policy fields for greater impact.

We work with members and stakeholders, including the Australian Government, to provide expertise and advice on gender equality and women's safety.

Executive Summary

Australia's income support system has received much criticism over the last decade, with valid concerns being raised about the astonishingly low rates of pay, the targeted compliance framework and overly punitive mutual obligations, the automating of decision making, the ParentsNext program and an employment services system that does not work to support people into long-term, sustainable employment. This policy brief focuses on the employment services system, while raising structural questions about Workforce Australia's responsibilities to job seekers and obligation to align with broader Australian Government objectives and strategies in relation to achieving gender equality and economic security for women.

There are currently very few, if any, mechanisms to understand how the employment services system fails to support job seekers to find meaningful and sustainable work. Workforce Australia does not routinely collect data in relation to failure to place clients in suitable work, or to support them to stay in work. Instead, the clients that can't be placed or are not still in placements at 26 weeks are positioned as the 'problem' and penalised or funnelled into specialist not-for-profit services that are underfunded for the kinds of wrap-around support they need to provide.

Australia's employment services system has a woefully low 26-week employment target of 15%, reflecting the low ambition of Workforce Australia to support people into sustainable employment. That the system routinely fails to meet this low target – in 2024-25 the outcome rate was only 11.7% – should be cause for significant concern and indicates serious flaws in the design of the system. That women represent only 45% of those with employment at 26 weeks is especially worrying.

Job seekers need an employment services system that invests in their potential, builds their skills and connects them with broader social services to overcome barriers to participation and build pathways to long-term sustainable employment. The employment services system must also integrate with gender equality strategies across government to ensure that occupational gender segregation and the gender pay gap are not being reproduced, reinforced or cemented.

To achieve this, Workforce Australia must move away from a one-size-fits-all approach and prioritise finding the right jobs for the right people. This requires a funding and provider model that values meaningful outcomes over profits for providers. It also requires an investment in trauma support and recovery, particularly for the long-term unemployed. There must be an obligation from Workforce Australia staff, employment services providers and employers themselves to provide trauma-informed support for

job seekers, recognise their skills and keep them safe in all their interactions with the system.

For this policy brief, the Working with Women Alliance consulted broadly with our Economic Equality Working Group and specifically with the GOGO Foundation[1] and WIRE,[2] who each have extensive experience of supporting marginalized women to navigate the employment services and income support systems.

Suitable and sustainable employment

Australia's employment services system continues to fall short in supporting women into long-term, sustainable employment. Despite a 26-week employment target of 15%, the outcome rate in June 2024 to June 2025 was only 11.7%.[3] These results point to a system focused on short-term placements rather than sustainability or quality of work. For women, this failure translates into ongoing cycles of insecure, low-paid employment and persistent economic vulnerability.

Women are consistently underrepresented in job placements through Workforce Australia. Department of Employment and Workplace Relations data shows that although women represent 47% of the total caseload, they are only 43% of people who are placed in employment and only 45% of those still in employment at 26 weeks.[4] Occupation shortages worsen as gender segregation intensifies, meaning that both men and women are more likely to be placed in gender segregated jobs.[5] Women face heightened risks of discrimination and harassment in male dominated occupations such as manufacturing and construction, and heightened risks of psychological distress in

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[1] https://www.gogofoundation.org.au/

[2] https://www.wire.org.au/

[3] Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2025, *Annual Report 2024-25*, Australian Government, https://www.dewr.gov.au/download/17273/department-employment-and-workplace-relations-annual-report-2024-25/41762/department-employment-and-workplace-relations-annual-report-2024-25/pdf

[4] Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2025, *Workforce Australia Services Job Placements and Outcomes – Quarter April to June 2025*, Australian Government, https://www.dewr.gov.au/employment-services-data/resources/workforce-australia-services-job-placements-and-outcomes-quarter-april-june-2025

[5] Jobs and Skills Australia, 2025, *New Perspectives on Old Problems: Gendered Jobs, Work and Pay*, Australian Government, https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/new-perspectives-old-problems-gendered-jobs-work-and-pay

female dominated occupations such as healthcare and social assistance.[6] These are systemic barriers to long-term employment by which women, and especially those within the employment services system, are particularly impacted. Without agency and support, women are landing in unsafe jobs or being penalised by the mutual obligations system for not accepting or tolerating unsafe jobs.

Current services are poorly aligned with women's real circumstances and needs. We have heard that Workforce Australia providers are more likely to place women in female dominated occupations or industries. This is hard to verify as published Workforce Australia data does not record the occupations or industries that different cohorts are placed into for employment. Structural factors such as gender segregation in the labour market and the undervaluing of female-dominated industries mean men are often placed into higher-paid jobs, while women are funnelled into casual or temporary roles that do not provide income stability and can leave women on a conveyer belt back into the employment services system.

Once women are employed, ongoing support is rare.

Women who are unable to engage in suitable work due to serious health conditions should be eligible for the Disability Support Pension, yet many are excluded because of systemic failures within Australia's health system. Although women are more likely to experience chronic and simultaneous health conditions,[7] men remain more likely to receive the Disability Support Pension.[8] Delayed diagnosis and high costs of medical assessments often prevent women from obtaining the documentation needed to access disability specific payments. The invisibility of chronic health and caring responsibilities in the employment services system mean that it is hard to access specific supports.

To create genuine pathways to long-term employment, women need tailored, trauma-informed support that builds confidence, skills, and connection to secure work

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[6] Building Commission NSW, 2024, *Research on women in the construction industry*, NSW Government, https://www.nsw.gov.au/departments-and-agencies/building-commission/building-and-construction-resources/research-on-women-construction-industry;
Safe Work Australia, 2024, *Snapshot: Psychological health and safety in the workplace*, https://data.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-02/Psychological-health-in-the-workplace_Snapshot_February2024.pdf

[7] Australian Women's Health Alliance, 2024, *The Gendered Experience of Chronic Conditions: Insights, Challenges and Opportunities*, https://australianwomenshealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Position-Paper-The-Gendered-Experience-of-Chronic-Conditions-1.pdf

[8] AIHW, 2024, *People with disability in Australia*, https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/income-and-finance/income-support

opportunities. Employment services must shift away from a one-size-fits-all approach and recognise sustainability as a true measure of success.

Mutual obligations

The current design of mutual obligations places disproportionate pressure on female job seekers who are often navigating intersecting barriers such as caring responsibilities, disability, trauma, or poverty. The system's underlying assumption - that people will not seek work without the threat of penalty - fails to recognise both the complexity of unemployment and the essential social and economic contributions of unpaid labour, most of which is performed by women.

Many activities required under mutual obligations, from short courses to compulsory face-to-face appointments, do little to improve women's employment prospects. Mandatory training is frequently designed around income incentives rather than employment outcomes. Women commonly report that these requirements are irrelevant to their skills and circumstances, and that completing them diverts time and energy away from genuine job preparation – such as seeking dental care, applying for suitable housing, working toward family reunification, or attending therapy and engaging in peer support, as well as setting up bank accounts, resumes and job applications.[9]

For women relying on income support, the ever-present threat of payment suspension can cause significant stress. Almost half of Workforce Australia participants have been threatened with, or subjected to, the loss of income support.[10] A missed appointment or uncompleted activity - often due to transport difficulties, caring emergencies and responsibilities, or provider error - can mean weeks without income. For women already living in financial precarity, a suspension or cancellation means the loss of essential household resources, often pushing them further into crisis.

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[9] Anglicare Australia, 2023, *Submission to the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services*, https://www.anglicare.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Submission-Workforce-Australia-FINAL.pdf

[10] Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2025, *Fairness in the Targeted Compliance Framework: when decisions are made beyond your control*, https://www.ombudsman.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/323205/Fairness-in-the-Targeted-Compliance-Framework.pdf

Rigid attendance requirements further exclude women in regional and remote areas, where service locations are sparse[11], transport options limited and childcare is, in some cases, non-existent. Despite these challenges, flexible or remote engagement options remain rare.

A reimagined approach must move away from punitive compliance and towards supportive, tailored engagement that recognises women's unpaid work, lived experience, and intersecting responsibilities as legitimate foundations for participation.

Funding

Current funding mechanisms within Workforce Australia entrench gender inequality by prioritising provider profit and short-term job placements over women's long-term economic security. Two-thirds of government funding for employment services flows to for-profit providers,[12] reinforcing a system that rewards volume rather than quality or tailored support. As a result, women seeking secure and safe employment remain underserved and excluded from meaningful pathways to financial security.

The reliance on payment-by-outcomes structures is inadequate for women who face multiple barriers to work. Providers are incentivised to prioritise jobseekers who can be placed quickly, effectively sidelining women with complex needs, such as those rebuilding after experiences of violence, managing caring responsibilities, or re-entering the workforce after extended absences or for the first time. These women often require tailored, trauma-informed and capacity-building support over longer periods - support that current funding models are unable to accommodate.

Smaller, specialist organisations face high barriers to participation due to complex procurement and accreditation processes. The segmentation of funding streams into youth, disability, and long-term unemployment categories fragments women's access to holistic support. Providers contracted under one stream are not adequately funded to assist women who fall across multiple eligibility areas, impeding continuity of care and discouraging innovative or cross-sectoral approaches. For example, WomenCAN

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[11] *Workforce Australia Providers Location All*, https://public.tableau.com/views/WorkforceAustraliaProvidersbyEmploymentRegions/WorkforceAustraliaProviders?%3AshowVizHome=no&%3Aembed=true

[12] Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, 2023, *Rebuilding Employment Services: Final report on Workforce Australia Employment Services*, Parliament of Australia, https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/RB000017/toc_pdf/RebuildingEmploymentServices.pdf

Australia had explicit funding to support women into trades, which made it difficult to provide foundational education to their participants. Despite referrals being made for people who had not completed basic education requirements, making them ineligible for apprenticeships, particular Workforce Australia partners refused to fund the additional courses.[13]

Department of Employment and Workplace Relations data on the distribution of the Workforce Australia Services Employment Fund shows that 75% of work-related training and licencing funds are appointed to male clients, despite being only 64% of recipients.[14] More broadly, the Employment Fund also favours men – women are 44% of recipients but receive only 38% of funds.[15] Conversely, specialist services are better able to utilise discretionary funds to target and tailor supports for women – such as by providing access to dental services for women who have experienced domestic and family violence or extreme poverty. But they are only able to do this if they are funded to do so.

The competitive, market-based design of the employment services system does little to foster collaboration between providers and discourages community-based approaches that could better support women's diverse needs. Similarly, mechanisms such as the $1,200 upfront engagement payment that providers receive when a new participant commences is too often directed toward internal organisational activities, rather than addressing women's specific and individual needs.

A redesigned payment model that prioritises quality, long-term outcomes for women would be a significant step toward an employment system that genuinely supports women's economic security and autonomy.

Providers

Between July and September 2024, Services Australia determined that over half of the job seekers assessed were not capable of meeting the job plan requirements assigned by

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[13] WomenCAN Australia, 2023, *Submission to House Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services*

[14] Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), 2025, *Workforce Australia Services Employment Fund – 1 July 2025 to 30 September 2025*, Australian Government, https://www.dewr.gov.au/employment-services-data/resources/workforce-australia-services-employment-fund-1-july-2025-30-september-2025

[15] ibid.

providers.[16] Three in five (60%) of those were found incapable only after disclosing new information, raising serious concerns about the capability of provider staff to recognise and respond to complexity at the outset and about the information sharing capacity within the employment services system.[17]

This pattern is particularly damaging for women, many of whom experience fluctuating employment capacity due to care responsibilities, chronic health conditions, or recovery from violence. As the Government focuses on building policy and legislation to support women in the 'middle years' at work, Workforce Australia must also consider how to support different cohorts of women within the employment services system. When provider assessments fail to capture these realities, women are pushed into unsuitable job plans and risk financial penalties for non-compliance with conditions they cannot meet.

Further, over half of provider capability interviews reviewed by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) did not follow correct procedure.[18] Over 11,000 complaints were lodged between mid-2022 and mid-2024, the vast majority concerning provider conduct - ranging from poor service and unprofessional behaviour to discrimination, bullying, and harassment.[19] There is no cohort-specific data in relation to the complaints, so we do not know the impact that gender is having on job seeker interactions with providers.

The framework used by DEWR to assess provider performance lacks integrity and transparency. Moderate performance ratings are frequently assigned in the absence of adequate evidence. In practice, this means that providers who fail to meet quality standards may continue operating with little consequence, benefiting from contract renewals and funding despite questionable performance. The absence of clear accountability reinforces a culture of low standards. Without a clear systemic obligation to jobseekers, this pattern further deepens their sense of disempowerment and lack of support.

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[16] Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2025, *Fairness in the Targeted Compliance Framework: when decisions are made beyond your control*, https://www.ombudsman.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0015/323205/Fairness-in-the-Targeted-Compliance-Framework.pdf

[17] ibid.

[18] ibid.

[19] ibid.

Ultimately, the problems within Workforce Australia's provider network reflect a structural disconnect between program objectives and women's lived realities. Without transparent performance management, genuine accountability, and incentives for quality service delivery, the system will continue to prioritise provider metrics over women's economic empowerment and outcomes.

Employers

Employment incentives within Workforce Australia, such as outcome payments and wage subsidies, prioritise quick placements and short-term retention rather than sustainable, gender-responsive employment. Providers are rewarded for meeting numerical milestones - 4, 12, and 26 weeks of employment - without regard for the quality or safety of the work. For women, this system often translates into insecure, low-paid positions that do not accommodate caring responsibilities or provide meaningful career development.

Further, large employers tend to partner with providers that can supply high volumes of workers, limiting opportunities for smaller, specialist services that better understand women's needs and barriers. As a result, women seeking flexible, safe, and supportive work are often excluded from placements that could lead to long-term economic security.

It is important to recognise that employers have a role to play in addressing these shortcomings. They should take responsibility for ensuring that jobs are suitable for women by adapting work hours, conditions, and environments to support participation and retention. Yet without structural mechanisms that require large providers to collaborate with or subcontract to specialist women's services, employers rarely access the expertise needed to create inclusive and supportive workplaces.

A more effective model would encourage collaboration between large employers, generalist providers, and specialist services to ensure that women are not placed into work at the expense of their long-term economic independence.

Staff

Evidence suggests that Workforce Australia staff capacity, training, and service centre design are inadequate to meet the needs of diverse job seekers[20] - particularly women facing complex barriers to employment.

For many women, engagement with employment services can be triggering or retraumatising. Limited training and support mean that many job agents within Workforce Australia are ill-equipped to provide trauma-informed, gender-sensitive case management or to assist women who require support across both vocational and non-vocational dimensions. High staff turnover further disrupts continuity of care, forcing women to repeatedly share personal histories. As a result, systemic challenges are too often mischaracterised as individual failings in motivation or readiness to work. This not only undermines women's confidence and trust in the system but reinforces patterns of exclusion.

The physical environment of Workforce Australia service centres further contributes to women's discomfort and disengagement. Job seekers are sometimes required to discuss sensitive, personal information in open spaces which is not conducive to building connection or encouraging open communication.

To build a workforce capable of supporting women effectively, training must be grounded in gender awareness and trauma-informed practice. Staff stability, adequate resourcing, and private, respectful service environments are essential to ensure Workforce Australia empowers women rather than perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

Recognising lived experience

For many marginalised women, especially those who have navigated poverty, family violence, unstable housing, or caring responsibilities, lived experience has fostered complex decision-making, resilience, and adaptability. Yet these capabilities are too often disregarded by assessment tools and intake forms that include no mechanism for capturing informal or experiential skills developed outside formal education.

This lack of recognition devalues women's contributions to the workplace and limits their economic opportunities. Employment services continue to prioritise formal qualifications

[20] System 2, The Behavioural Insights Team, Paul Ramsay Foundation, 2023, Reimagining the Employment Services System of Australia: Solution prototypes and implementation plans,

and linear career histories, excluding women whose expertise is grounded in experience rather than certification. In doing so, the system fails to account for the relational, interpersonal, and emotional intelligence that are increasingly central to effective workplaces.

Addressing this gap requires new language frameworks and tools within employment services to identify and value experiential knowledge. Embedding lived experience into assessment and job-matching processes would represent a cultural shift toward a more equitable and responsive system.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen funding and support for women-focused services

1.1 Commit to long-term, sustainable funding for specialist and community-based organisations that provide wrap-around support pathways into meaningful, long-term employment for marginalised women.

1.2 Require large employment service providers to collaborate with and subcontract to specialist women's services to improve inclusivity and outcomes.

1.3 Reduce barriers, such as rigid funding models and complex procurement processes, for not-for-profit and community-based organisations to enter and remain in the system.

1.4 Implement recommendations from the Rebuilding Employment Services report.[21]

2. Build a gender-responsive and skilled employment services workforce

2.1 Provide staff with the training, tools, and resources to deliver trauma-informed and culturally appropriate support.

2.2 Redesign funding models to reward providers for achieving sustainable, high-quality employment outcomes.

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[21] Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, 2023, *Rebuilding Employment Services: Final report on Workforce Australia Employment Services*, Parliament of Australia, https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportrep/RB000017/toc_pdf/RebuildingEmploymentServices.pdf

2.3 Encourage employers take specific actions to address intersectional gender challenges and promote gender-inclusive workplace culture specific to their industry, including offering cultural leave and embedding First Nations gender justice and equality into anti-discrimination training and work practices.

2.4 Reform the eligibility criteria for ongoing support to better assist women who move in and out of the workforce and those facing intersecting disadvantage, including those excluded from the Disability Support Pension.

2.5 Scale current WGEA and Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) occupational gender segregation interventions across Workforce Australia provider tender agreements.

2.6 Introduce procurement incentives through equity performance clauses in Workforce Australia tender agreements, enabling providers to earn bonus payments for meeting or exceeding cohort targets for female job seekers in male dominated industries or males in female dominated industries.

2.7 Ensure there are private meeting rooms available at every Workforce Australia location that provide safe, secure spaces for face-to-face meetings.

3. Make employment requirements fair, flexible, and relevant

3.1 Reform the mutual obligation regime to ensure they are realistic, accessible, and directly linked to employability, removing punitive payment suspensions.

3.2 Redesign provider assessments to add an 'insufficient data' category, removing processes that categorise providers as moderate when there is not enough information available.

3.3 Improve record keeping and information sharing between providers and Services Australia to ensure women's circumstances are fully understood before compliance decisions are made.

3.4 Increase flexible and remote engagement options to accommodate women with caring responsibilities, disability, or those in regional and remote areas.

3.5 Ensure there is adequate funding and resourcing towards the 15-hour universal access program for early education, supporting women to return to employment.

4. Recognise lived experience and transferable skills

4.1 Develop new language and assessment frameworks to formally recognise “soft skills” and lived experience as valuable employability assets.

4.2 Include space within jobseeker assessments to record experiential and informal skills that reflect women’s practical capabilities and resilience.

5. Design services around lived experience and local community knowledge

5.1 Involve women with lived experience in co-designing programs, policy, and service delivery to ensure they are relevant and empowering.