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Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT AND  
WORKPLACE RELATIONS

**Reference: Pay equity and increasing female participation in the workforce**

THURSDAY, 4 JUNE 2009

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS**

**Thursday, 4 June 2009**

**Members:** Ms Jackson (*Chair*), Mr Haase (*Deputy Chair*), Ms Bird, Ms Hall, Mr Hayes, Mr Keenan, Mr Marles, Mr Ramsey, Dr Southcott and Mr Symon

**Members in attendance:** Ms Bird, Mr Haase, Mr Ramsey, Mr Symon

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

The causes of any potential disadvantages in relation to women's participation in the workforce including, but not limited to:

- The adequacy of current data to reliably monitor employment changes that may impact on pay equity issues;
- The need for education and information among employers, employees and trade unions in relation to pay equity issues;
- Current structural arrangements in the negotiation of wages that may impact disproportionately on women;
- The adequacy of recent and current equal remuneration provisions in state and federal workplace relations legislation;
- The adequacy of current arrangements to ensure fair access to training and promotion for women who have taken maternity leave and/or returned to work part time and/or sought flexible work hours; and
- The need for further legislative reform to address pay equity in Australia.

**WITNESSES**

**SALHOUSE, Ms Susan, Vice-President, Women With Disabilities Australia..... 1**



**Committee met at 11.16 am****SALTHOUSE, Ms Susan, Vice-President, Women With Disabilities Australia**

**ACTING CHAIR (Mr Haase)**—Welcome. This is the 23rd public hearing for the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations inquiry into pay equity and associated issues related to increasing female participation in the workforce.

Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. I advise you that these proceedings are being broadcast on the internet. We have received your written submission to this inquiry. Do you wish to present any additional submissions or perhaps make an opening statement?

**Ms Salthouse**—I would like to make an opening statement speaking to that submission, which I know you all have, and to thank you very much for the opportunity of talking to you face to face. I know that what we emphasised in our submission was that we acknowledge the gender pay gap for women, which is currently around the 17 per cent mark in Australia, but really want to bring home how that situation is exacerbated for women with disabilities. As you know, there is a great deal of gender discrimination in the workplace, and overlaid for us in the workplace is disability discrimination. This combines to effectively lock us out of the workforce compared to our non-disabled women peers or compared to men with disabilities. The figures that are available from Institute of Health and Welfare and ABS surveys really point this out—that women with disabilities are just not getting adequate access to the workplace.

One of the things that has become apparent to Women With Disabilities Australia over the last few years—I suppose since 2005—is that we started looking at educational achievements of women with disabilities, and in fact they are doing better percentage wise in graduate numbers compared to men with disabilities coming out of post-year-10 qualifications and also coming out of university, but this is not translating into employment for them. Part of the reason for that is that they tend to be clustered in the more gendered, gender stereotyped, studies, but that is not the whole story.

The fact that this is happening in Australia has been taken up at the United Nations level. You might be aware that the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have just reported. The report came out after 22 May. I just draw your attention to paragraph 18 from their concluding comments about Australia. They say:

**The Committee notes with concern the high unemployment rates among indigenous people, asylum seekers, migrants and people with disabilities, and the significant difficulties they face to enjoy their right to work equally.**

They go on to say that ‘special programs and measures’ must ‘be designed to address the significant barriers’. I propose that in fact, yes, specific programs and measures must be designed and targeted, but not just at people with disabilities. In anything that is put in place, we have to address the disproportionate discrimination against women with disabilities.

As you know, in our submission, we put forward a number of strategies. I would just like to go through a couple of those. We need some gender-specific measures. Of all the measures that I

look at internationally, in Australia there really is only the National Disability Services Workforce Project, and it does not have a women with disability focus or target. If we look overseas, the UK Office for Disability Issues has requirements for targets for all departments and a reporting regime—and that is really important to put in place in Australia as well—but there is no focus on women, and yet the same thing happens there. New South Wales has a target program to have 12 per cent of people with disabilities and seven per cent of people with disabilities in the workplace being people who need modifications in the workplace, but again there is nothing there to give that extra proactive approach for women with disabilities.

So we are advocating for targeted research programs. We know that CEDAW, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in their concluding comments to Australia in 2006 said the same thing: get some disaggregated data about women with disabilities, establish some baselines. We need that to happen in a workplace context as well because unless we get some baselines we are not going to be able to measure what is happening.

The Disability Employment Network services are very important for women with disabilities, but, if you look at the statistics, two-thirds of their clients are men. I am sure that the DENS are not discriminating on people who come to their door, but we need research to see why these educated women with disabilities are not getting the assistance that they need. There is another area for some targeted programs to happen.

There is one thing that happens—and I do not know if people have brought it up in this context of pay equity for women. We are calling for the separation of income support programs like the disability support pension from the disability support programs like rent assistance and access to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. A colleague of mine here in the ACT who is an electric wheelchair user and who is tertiary qualified has just won a job as the CEO of a major advocacy organisation here in the ACT. She is on a good salary, but immediately it is pegged back by not having access anymore to those disability supports for her high medical costs, so, even though she is now expending a lot more energy earning the money, it is immediately washed away because the disability supports are not tied to her income. So it is like a catch-22.

**ACTING CHAIR**—You said because they are not tied—or because they are tied?

**Ms Salthouse**—Sorry, because they are tied; I beg your pardon. Once you are earning a certain amount of money there is a tapering off for the disability support pension, and eventually you do not need the disability support pension, which is an excellent outcome. But, if the long-term outcome is that you have about the same disposable income, it is detrimental; it is a disincentive for people getting meaningful work. So we do want to see something in that area.

Another anomaly that has cropped up in the last week is that one of our committee members, who is a social worker, has just been made redundant due to a restructuring process in a major community organisation in Victoria. Her position is that she cannot register with a Disability Employment Network until her redundancy time in that position is finished. So there is no facility for concurrently finishing off the last month in her job but at the same time getting some work-search things happening. She needs some assistance because of her disability but she is not able to register yet with the DEN. So that is something that is discriminating against her as a tertiary qualified person in getting back into the workforce.

One of the outcomes of this global financial crisis or any restructuring is that because women with disabilities are so disproportionately represented in those part-time, casual and low-paid jobs they are in the jobs that we know are being particularly affected now. They might have been put on in a casual capacity and they are going to be very affected by any restructuring in a workplace. We are already beginning to see that in anecdotal evidence that comes in from people in some distress phoning Women with Disabilities to find out what they can do to get back into the workforce.

Once they are in the workforce, women with disabilities hit that double discrimination and they are not given promotional opportunities. They can sometimes get into the workforce under a proactive appointment process and then they are parked. They are not given higher duties; they are not even given work that is commensurate with their qualifications. We have women who have double degrees. In fact, we tend to collect qualifications, because if you are not getting a job then what can you possibly do? If you are an intelligent person you do some more study. They collect qualifications and go to training courses but it does not translate into commensurate employment in the workplace. So the first hurdle is getting the job and the second is staying in the job.

The other thing which I think needs some attention is that women with disabilities are also mothers of children and are in relationships, but you know the scenario for women—they are still doing the major part of the household chores. When this happens to a woman with disabilities, who has put herself out on a limb energy-wise to get through a day and she still has to do all those household chores, it just means there is a commensurate sapping of her energies. I suppose if we had research in that area it would show that it affects her productivity in the workplace. So I think we need to look beyond just those disability supports and at what home care supports can be put in place or, for instance, what labour-saving devices could be made available, say, tax-free, without GST. For instance, in my situation—

**ACTING CHAIR**—Excuse me, Ms Salthouse. The bell that is ringing indicates that there is a division in the House of Representatives. We will suspend this hearing and return as soon as we are able to.

**Proceedings suspended from 11.29 am to 11.46 am**

**ACTING CHAIR**—Sorry about that delay, Ms Salthouse. I reconvene this hearing. For our listeners out there, apologies for the interruption; there was a division called in the House. We have attended to that and now we are back on deck and it is over to you, Susan.

**Ms Salthouse**—I think when you left, I was extolling the virtues of a microwave to a woman with disabilities in that those labour-saving devices become very important when you are going to be in the workforce and your energy levels are sapped. You can imagine for most people with disabilities, getting through a day does take a little bit more expenditure of energy. I am thinking about whether we could have some way of making it easier for women who are in the workforce to access those labour-saving devices because that would really help them maintain their workforce participation, their jobs. I am not quite sure how we would do that.

In the domestic sphere, we need to look at child care for women with disabilities. If you are limited to public transport or taxis to get around, you can imagine how hard it is to find an

accessible childcare facility. You have to go by public transport to drop your child off, which could take you half the day. If you have to go by taxi then you have those additional costs, which the mobility allowance does not cover. Of pivotal importance to all women with disabilities is getting some accessible and affordable transport to get to and from work. I am not quite sure what we do, because that is way out of left field from what we have been considering, but it is a definite barrier for women with disabilities—that is, getting logical affordable transport options.

Certainly we need portability of our disability related support so that a woman with disabilities has the ability to apply for a job outside where she lives. I know in the ACT they have had a graduate program which has targeted women with disabilities and they have brought people into the state to get public service jobs. They brought people in on occasions, but not thought about the supports that a woman who is visually impaired needs. She comes into Canberra, has no idea how to get around, does not know how to get to her office, and so we have to have those sorts of things in place.

Women with disabilities in the workplace would benefit from networking. If there was some money put into a website—graduates in the ACT can access a graduate workplace. We could do that through some sort of dedicated website that would enable people with disabilities in the public service, or in the wider community, to network.

If we are looking at that twin discrimination, one of the big things we need to have is some across-the-board workplace awareness training. It makes a huge difference. People do not deliberately or consciously discriminate, but when they are just not aware of how to approach and work equitably with somebody who is deaf, for example—just knowing that mirrors on the side of their monitor help that person know when there is someone in the vicinity, knowing that you have to go into that person's line of vision so that they can look at you and lip-read, those sorts of things are not deliberately done, but if we do not have effective disability awareness training, then it discriminates. That is all I would like to say about that. I am sure there are a lot of things we could put in place to give women with disabilities that extra boost, to get them into the workforce and then maintain them in the workforce. They are champing at the bit; they really want to have meaningful and meaningfully remunerated jobs. That is all they asking for.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Thank you. That was wonderful evidence to illuminate your submission. I know there time constraints, and I would like to throw to Ms Bird first to ask questions.

**Ms BIRD**—You touched on the issue of women often being in the most vulnerable jobs in part-time and casual employment. In the many ways that we collect data on the workforce, do we collect data that identifies the percentage of people with disabilities, and women in particular, in the workforce and what the nature of what their employment is?

**Ms Salthouse**—We are really hamstrung by not having the data that we need. You know that we are calling for statistics that enable us to disaggregate the data on a gender basis. We really need to also make it very clear that we do need to give the opportunity for women, when data collection is being done, to identify or disclose as having a disability. I was talking about that in the break when you were in the chamber. Of course we know that not everybody will disclose their disability, that is a personal choice, but unless we make a real attempt to enable people to disclose at a data collection time—even during the interview they may not disclose, but at a data collection time there might be a propensity for them to disclose so that they can be counted, so

that appropriate policies can be put in place. That is a very important thing that we need some direction to do. And while we are considering changes to the equal opportunity for women in the Workplace Authority, we need some sort of central point for collection of data about women in the workplace and it needs to have some directives and targets about women with disabilities in the workplace. We know that there are overlays of Indigenous employment figures and migrant worker employment figures. We need to vamp up our collection of data.

**Ms BIRD**—It is not a surprising answer, but I appreciate having it on the record.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Further to that, what institution or entity do you believe would be best equipped to collect this data? Do you have any suggestions there? Would you suggest that the Australian Bureau of Statistics, for instance, is the organisation charged with such a delicate job?

**Ms Salthouse**—You are quite right, in that data is collected by a number of organisations. I suppose the foremost one is the Bureau of Statistics. You will see in our submission that we have quoted from the Institute of Health and Welfare and a number of other organisations. In relation to workplace statistics, I think there is a place for a central authority looking at women in the workplace to work in conjunction with the Bureau of Statistics; that is a very important crossover. I would be happy for the Bureau of Statistics to remain as the major collector of data on all levels of statistics in Australia. But I think we need to make it very clear that, if they are to be the major collector of data, they need some advisory groups on how they collect the data and that women with disabilities need to be represented on any advisory groups. If we get women with disabilities represented at inaugural stages of policy and program development then we avoid that situation of retrofitting and having it as an add-on. If they are able to consider the position for women with disabilities as a bona fide marginalised group that they need to collect statistics on, that should spill across all their data collection and should also be applied to employment data.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Through your own experiences, do you have any information for us about disabled women that you know and why they are perhaps not in the workforce?

**Ms Salthouse**—I will talk about one case that I know of. There is a person with an autism spectrum condition who has tertiary TAFE qualifications and who would have been, I would say, grossly exploited in that she has been asked to do a workplace trial in maybe four, five or six positions. Because they do not have awareness training and because there are not the right supports in place, this person, with extreme intelligence but with some constraints on how she interacts with others, does a volunteer workplace trial and then gets shown the door. That happens repeatedly. You can imagine the effect on the esteem of a person who has struggled and tried to get her tertiary qualifications. She has them there on the certificate and it does not translate to work because the people in the workplace start out with goodwill but do not have the awareness training of how to put supports in place. So that is one case.

**ACTING CHAIR**—How about the other side of the spectrum, where somebody is not working and we might identify circumstances why they choose not to work? I am looking to your statement about the income derived being a negative to welfare benefits.

**Ms Salthouse**—Yes, being eroded. Yes, we can point to people who look at the job that they might be offered, look at the income that they are likely to get, look at the additional costs that

they will have getting to and from work by taxis—so deduct those from what the increased salary would be—and look at the wear and tear on their wheelchair or their equipment, for instance, and say, ‘How can I manage this?’

**ACTING CHAIR**—I understand.

**Ms Salthouse**—We need to give those people a boost, because not being employed makes them isolated. Even though they have made that conscious decision, it is eroding of self-esteem. So we need to look at helping employers to be more flexible. I am loquacious in these things, I am sorry.

**Ms BIRD**—Please excuse me, Chair; I have to go to my next committee hearing. I am sorry, Susan, for having to leave early.

**Ms Salthouse**—Thank you very much for being here, Sharon, and for your questions.

**Mr RAMSEY**—There are a couple of things I want to pick up. You identify the quite severe amount of gender based discrimination in this particular sector of the workforce. You spoke about a woman friend of yours who is now a CEO. She said she had lost her disability support pension, her health card and her pharmaceutical benefits. That is not gender specific though. That is exactly the same for a disabled male.

**Ms Salthouse**—True.

**Mr RAMSEY**—So what do you recommend we do about that?

**Ms Salthouse**—I think it does need to be looked at across the board for all people with disabilities. But where it hits women with disabilities is that they have got that additional difficulty of cracking into the workplace. So, yes, you are quite right—the delinking of income supports and disability supports goes across the board for women with disabilities. But what concerns us is that double discrimination, when we are seeing twice as many men with disabilities in full-time employment as women. Twice as many women with disabilities are in part-time work; that is all they are being offered. It is like giving them the crumbs. So I quite agree that the delinking of those two supports is important for all, but where we are seeing it translating into terrible outcomes for women with disabilities is that they are not even breaking through that gender barrier.

**Mr RAMSEY**—Just to take that further, because it is exactly what you are talking about, I understand you do not have the statistics to deal with the question, but two-thirds of the Disability Employment Network’s clients are men. Can you hypothesize on why you think that is? Presumably, to become a client, you go to the network and you say, ‘I want to register.’ So why is this the situation?

**Ms Salthouse**—I think we need some research looking at, ‘Why have we got that?’

**Mr RAMSEY**—But you do not even have—

**Ms Salthouse**—I don't have any idea. Those figures come from the annual reports on Commonwealth services as to how many people—

**Mr RAMSEY**—I do not doubt the figures. I was just wondering what you might suggest.

**Ms Salthouse**—One of the things that we put forward as a strategy to address the barrier is some research. We have a dearth of information about why this is happening. Is it because women with disabilities are daunted by the prospect? Is it because they have had one try at getting into the workforce and been knocked back? Is it because they have got home duties? I really do not know what is keeping them out of the Disability Employment Network services.

One thing I need to say about the DENs is that they historically have dealt more with people with intellectual disabilities. They do have some difficulties dealing with people with professional qualifications because their staff are not used to it and sometimes their staff feel daunted that they have got far lower qualifications. Research might show that women with disabilities are going in through the open job network. But we do not know. So when we combine the figures that we do know from the DENs with what it translates to from what we see where women end up in the workforce, then all we can say is that this is a terrible situation. So, no matter where women with disabilities are trying to get into the workforce, if they are doing that independently they are still hitting that double discrimination barrier and not succeeding.

**ACTING CHAIR**—Susan, I am notorious for being on thin ice and then choosing to tap dance; however, playing devil's advocate, might a reason be that the benefits paid allow a disabled woman at home to, if you like, survive, but the situation is satisfactory and why swap that familiar surrounding for the unknown environment of a workforce where the treatment may not be appropriate or desirable or it may be disappointing?

**Ms Salthouse**—I think start tap dancing now.

**ACTING CHAIR**—You disagree strongly?

**Ms Salthouse**—Yes, I disagree strongly, because we have an Australia-wide discussion list on the internet. Whilst that discriminates against the women who cannot afford to be on the internet, we have lamentations loud and clear about how women would love to be in the workforce. It is certainly not a comfort zone that stops them from looking for work.

**Mr SYMON**—I am interested in the participation rate you mentioned early on. Is the 12 per cent difference for women with disabilities versus males with disabilities in 2003 caused by anything that you are aware of? We have just been through a discussion parallel to that, but what is keeping that 12 per cent of women from looking for work?

**Ms Salthouse**—This is really the same theme, isn't it? It is: why aren't we showing a higher participation rate? Where is the counting not happening? Is it indeed a statistic where they are not being counted? Is it because they are getting these casual, part-time jobs but they are getting them at the local shop, so they are very small jobs? Is there undercounting because women with disabilities are in fact getting very small amounts of work and that they are doing work up to the point where the taper rate sets in and they are not being counted?

**Mr SYMON**—So you suggest it could be a statistical problem rather than a real problem?

**Ms Salthouse**—Maybe it is a statistical problem rather than a tangible problem. I would suggest that, if they are getting such casual work that they are working only up to the point of the taper rate, we need to look at that because a lot of them are skilled women. So it could be that there is undercounting. It could be that we are not offering them flexible enough employment at a realistic pay. That is something else that concerns me. When you are in a part-time casual job, you are just getting the crumbs. We want something that is more commensurate with their abilities. So, yes, I call again for some research to be done and for some money to go into those areas to look at this. If we are talking out of our hats that would be wonderful. It would be a great result if we found that women with disabilities are getting the employment they need and want, but that is not the anecdotal evidence coming to us.

**Mr SYMON**—No. Going further down the same page of your submission, it says:

... 71% of women with disabilities are now completing Year 10 or higher in secondary education, compared to 68% of men with disabilities ...

And there are similar completion rates for post secondary education between the two groups. That should show up in wage rates—

**Ms Salthouse**—It should.

**Mr SYMON**—especially when it is like for like. Going on a bit further, you said that many women in that area go on and do extra education on top of that because they cannot break into the workforce, which leads to the gist of my next question. Further on in your submission you talk about barriers to employment, especially in the built environment. I was just wondering if there are any particular barriers that exist there that affect women more than men and might explain a lack of opportunities to get into employment and therefore being paid anything at all.

**Ms Salthouse**—I think that if we are looking at accessibility in the workplace that does apply to both men and women with disabilities trying to get into the workplace. What we then look at is the fact that, as I think I mentioned, even though those figures show similar graduation rates, they tend to be clustered both at the TAFE level and the university level in more stereotypical areas of women's work. So they are in health and social work at the TAFE level. Some of those qualifications are life skills, but women are more likely to get a qualification in beauty treatment than in mechanics. So some of it is the gendered education system that we still have.

**Mr SYMON**—We have discussed that at this committee previously, if you care to read some of those transcripts.

**Ms Salthouse**—Despite vocational adult and education training, we do still have that mindset, which women themselves can bring through culture into the education system, and that plays out. At the tertiary level, we tend to have more women with social work and health related qualifications and those sorts of things. That is certainly a gendered effect which is translating into lower paid work. Even if they get into a professional job, it generally translates to lower paid work and can translate into no work at all. I am sure you are going to come up with strategies to address this. We have been working on it. It is 25 years since CEDAW was ratified.

We have to come up with continuing proactive strategies to try and break down that gendered workforce. We know that Australia's workforce is the most gendered in the OECD, so something needs to be put in place. Women With Disabilities Australia will be right there on the shoulders of whatever proactive strategies are put in place so that we too can ride on any new waves of breaking down that gendered workforce in Australia.

**ACTING CHAIR**—I have a final question because time escapes us. Susan, I would just like you to mention those that are most known to you. Apart from the WWDA, what other organisations come to mind that are available to women with disabilities to provide specific information about employment services?

**Ms Salthouse**—You would be aware that the JobAccess website is available for both employers and employees with disabilities.

**ACTING CHAIR**—I do not expect an exhaustive list, of course.

**Ms Salthouse**—But as far as there being specific places where women with disabilities can check in, I think Women With Disabilities is the only body in Australia. We are the national peak body for women with disabilities. We are the only cross-disability organisation for women. Women with disabilities do tend to check in with us. They might also have affiliations and links with specific disability organisations which give them advice on specific assisting equipment, but we are the only cross-disability organisation.

**ACTING CHAIR**—We might conclude at this stage. Susan, I thank you for your attendance here today. If you have been asked to provide any additional information, will you please forward it to the secretary. We may also have additional questions following this hearing which the secretariat will forward to you for a response. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence to which you may make corrections of grammar and fact.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Symon**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 12.14 pm**