



## **QDN SUMMARY REPORT**

### **Women with Disability Policy Forum**

**Online forum held 31<sup>st</sup> August 2022**

## About Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN)

Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) is an organisation of, for, and with people with disability. The organisation's motto is "nothing about us without us." QDN operates a state-wide network of over 2,000 members and supporters who provide information, feedback and views from a consumer perspective to inform systemic disability policy and disability advocacy. This paper is informed by the lived experience of our members, all of whom have disability, which includes an online women's network of 53 members from around the State.

## Introduction

More than 4.4 million people in Australia have a disability (1 in 5), with approximately 900,000 of people with disability living in Queensland. Women\* with disability make up just over half of this number. Women with disability are **not** a homogenous group. They are diverse in disability, age, ethnicity, sexuality, culture, family structure, socio-economic status, regionality, ability, health, in the same way that women from the broader community are, however they face additional barriers, vulnerability and discrimination.

The Queensland Women's Strategy 2022 – 2027 outlines a strong framework to progress gender equality for all women in Queensland. The additional impacts of gender inequality and structural inequality experienced by women with disability and others are acknowledged in the strategy in *Impact Area 4: Women with diverse backgrounds and experiences*. QDN welcomes this acknowledgement of the intersectional disadvantage experienced by women with disability that makes it even harder for them to reach their full potential and participate fully in life and community.

Intersectional means the ways in which different aspects of a person's identity can mean they are affected by many forms of discrimination or barriers at the same time.

*"This strategy speaks to the hopes I hold for myself and our states future by removing intersectional disadvantage and fostering an inclusive supportive Queensland society in our workplaces, schools, homes and communities, for all women with disabilities". Jane Britt QDN board member and disability advocate.*

The vision for the strategy states that: Women and girls have equal rights, and equal access to opportunities. Women and girls are safe, valued, and able to freely participate and succeed in the economic, social and cultural opportunities available. Women and girls are recognised and celebrated for their achievements and contributions to the community.

This vision is mapped out across five key impact areas to focus the work: economic security, women's safety, health and wellbeing, elevating First Nations women, women with diverse backgrounds and experiences, and empowerment and recognition.

\*We use the term 'women' and 'girls' throughout this report, which extends to all women, girls, feminine identifying and non-binary people with disability.

## Forum Overview

QDN members have told us of the importance of women with disability being at the forefront of bringing the Queensland Women's Strategy to life. QDN members have communicated strongly that making change happen needs to start by and for women with disability and ensure it is 'nothing about us without us.' To contribute to the conversation and inform the agenda, QDN held an online forum event on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2022, around the experiences of women with disability to explore the Queensland Women's Strategy, what it means in practice, gaps in policy and how we can work together to bring this to life and influence change. The aim of this forum was to give members a

platform to make an impact in improving the lives of women living with disability in Queensland by leading, influencing, informing and connecting.

This forum was an important opportunity to discuss shared experiences of women living with disability in Queensland in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote communities. Over 30 QDN members who participated in the forum identified key issues for women living with disability as well as some solutions to some of these key issues.

QDN's online forum opened with a mix of speakers at the beginning and a brief discussion panel between QDN members. Participants then had the opportunity to move out of breakout rooms facilitated and moderated by QDN peer leaders and staff to generate feedback from individuals about key issues as well as solutions to improve the lives of women with disability moving forward. QDN produced this report from the feedback gathered at the forum.

## Speakers

The forum was opened by Jane Britt, QDN Board Director and member. The keynote speakers at the online forum included:

- Jane Britt – QDN Board Director and National Policy Officer at Blind Citizens Australia.
- Heidi Mathieson – Assistant Director, Partnerships and Engagement Office for Women and Violence Prevention Department of Justice and Attorney-General.
- Kate Dufty - QDN Emerging Leader from 2021 from Gladstone, a passionate regional advocate and campaigner at a local level around equality and accessibility.
- Maria Scharnke - QDN Emerging Leader from 2022 is a proudly Autistic, multiply Disabled advocate who works in disability policy and (Disabled) human rights. She has a passion for disability theory and is on the board of Women with Disabilities Australia.

## Presentation Summary

Jane set the scene for the Women with Disability Policy Forum explaining certain key statements and ideas from the Queensland Women's Strategy, using a disability lens. She communicated the importance of representation for women and girls with disability, that you "can't be what you can't see", as well as highlighting that women with disabilities face additional intersectional challenges. Jane highlighted that 18.3% of Queenslanders are living with disability and invited the forum participants to reflect on how the Queensland Women's Strategy can support their visions and futures.

Heidi gave an overview of the Queensland Women's Strategy, discussing the five key priorities of economic security, women's safety, health and wellbeing, elevating First Nations women, women with diverse backgrounds and experiences, and empowerment and recognition. She explained that this is the second Queensland Women's Strategy, following on from the 2016-2021 Women's Strategy and that towards the end of 2021, the government spent three months consulting with the community around the what the priorities of the strategy should be as well as collecting any other input around the renewal of the strategy and how people in the community were wanting it to unfold.

Heidi highlighted some key issues for women including:

- The gender pay gap in Queensland, Heidi explained that there is a gap of 15%, that women tend to be in the lowest paying jobs and industries, are continuing to do the majority of unpaid work in the home caring for family members and are increasingly retiring into poverty with older women being the fastest growing homeless population in Queensland.

- The crisis of domestic and family violence and sexual violence for women in Queensland, Heidi reported that women are more likely to experience both domestic and family violence as well as sexual violence and in the past few months, five Queensland women have reportedly died at the hands of intimate partners in Queensland. Heidi stressed the importance of addressing gender inequality, to ensure a community and culture that doesn't enable domestic and family violence as well as sexual violence.
- women with diverse identities experience multiple challenges and the need for a cultural shift to break down systemic and cultural barriers to create equality for all women.

She also highlighted commitments that the Queensland Government are working on such as working with women and girls with disability on the development of policies, programs and initiatives that impact them, as well as a path to treaty for First Nations Queenslanders using a gendered lens.

A panel discussion with host Karin Swift, Kate Dufty and Maria Scharnke followed Heidi's speech. Kate Dufty and Maria Scharnke highlighted the need to have more focus on women with disability without segregating them from other women as well as having follow up action plans, with outcomes that can be measured, to back up the words of the Strategy. All speakers discussed issues around economic security, healthcare and safety which will be detailed further under the key issues summary.

## Breakout rooms

Participants were allocated to breakout rooms to discuss the issues and respond to two key questions. Breakout rooms were facilitated by a QDN member to engage participants in conversation in response to the following questions:

- What are the key issues for women with disability?
- What ideas or solutions can we offer?

## Key issues

Whilst QDN are drawing attention to a few key issues for Queensland women with disability in this report, it is worth noting that women with disability are impacted by all issues which affect women.

*"We are women before we are our disability, every decision affects us, it might affect us in different intensity levels, but ultimately there is no need to segregate us from other women. It is great that there is recognition of women with diverse backgrounds. There is a necessity to make it known that yes, we are slightly diverse from the mainstream, but all the issues affect us, we are not just a subgroup".*

*Kate Dufty, QDN Emerging Leader 2021 graduate*

Some of the key issues identified by forum participants with disability included:

### **Financial security and employment:**

*Women with disability have a considerably lower rate of workforce participation compared to men with disability (49.4 per cent and 57.8 per cent respectively). ('Women with Disability,' 2017)*

There are significant barriers to women living with disability participating in paid work. Lack of accessibility into workplaces, both for people with physical and intellectual disability can prevent women living with disability from even being able to enter the workforce to begin with. Traditional workplace roles do not always fit and accommodate for certain needs of people living with disability and information and communications within the workplace are not always accessible for people living with disability.

*'Traditional workplace roles do not always fit; my neurological condition means I can only work two hours at a time. We lack practical examples of how it could work.'*

*Workshop Participant*

Many workplaces use a 'one size fits all approach' in their implementation of policies and procedures for people living with disability, which doesn't allow for a diverse range of disabilities that require individual, person-centred considerations in the workplace. There is also not enough representation and recruitment of women living with disability into leaderships positions, opportunities for women and girls living with disability to access all levels of education and training.

The gender wage gap affects women living with disability significantly more, as people living with disability are also paid significantly less than people living without disability. Many women with disability are unable to access financial independence due to barriers accessing the workforce and/or government payments and in turn, can then only rely on parents, intimate partners and caregivers for financial support.

### **Safety**

- 1.2 million women with disability have experienced physical violence after the age of 15, compared with 1.7 million without disability (AIHW, 2022).
- 748,000 women with disability have experienced sexual violence after the age of 15, compared with 978,000 without disability (AIHW, 2022).

Large gaps have been identified through this forum within domestic and family violence services as well as Family Court and Child Protective services and systems for women living with disability. Often staff, magistrates, legislators and policy makers do not consider the voices of women living with disability, do not understand the unique challenges that women living with disability experience and at times have not been using a model of empowerment in acknowledging and supporting the agency of women with disability. This can lead to unethical removal of children from their mothers as well as risking the safety of women living with disability as well as their children.

Women living with disability have reported that they may need additional assistance with legal support in regard to Domestic and Family Violence, Family and Child Protection courts to have more accessibility to the legal advice and processes.

Women living with disability face the additional vulnerability of being at risk of experiencing carer violence, which adds a further barrier to leaving violence when they are dependent on carer support and potentially not able to complete certain safety measures such as ring emergency services without their carers support. There are also more barriers in general for women living with disability leaving violence, sometimes due to physically being unable to leave as well as difficulties communicating with services based on communicative capacity.

One of the forum participants Sarah (not her real name) spoke to her personal experience of violence, and the additional risk, complexity and fear she experienced, and the lack of preparedness and accessibility of the system supposed to support women. The police response was "not really educated about women with disability, especially those who are completely isolated, don't get proper support, and use assisted technology. Sarah experienced medical gaslighting via her partner and her doctor, she said" so that the doctors are not aware of the severity of the disability of the person".

*The intention of a Domestic Violence Order (DVO) is to keep women safe, "but in reality, everyone knows that it puts the victim even more in danger. In my case police assured me that they would*

*provide safe house accommodation so that when the DVO was issued I was safe, but once I agreed to issue the DVO, crisis support came to relocate me and then they told me that there was no suitable, accessible accommodation”.*

*Finding accessible crisis accommodation for women is really difficult... “I couldn’t find any accessible accommodation without help, even the NDIA was aware of the emergency and high risk in this case, however they rejected it without reading the documents...just to find a safe place, accessible home, is just a traumatic challenge after challenge.”*

*The challenge is an ongoing one... “So, he still knows where I am. The Police changed the front door lock, but it doesn’t make any difference, because the door can be broken easily. And if you came here or anyone comes here, I’m stuck in there, I cannot run away, I cannot hide, I cannot ask for emergency services because I need someone to communicate on my behalf... Everything about safety is a challenge”.*

*Workshop participant*

## **Healthcare**

*“The poor health of women with disability is due to a number of factors, such as the cost of health care, limited financial resources, lack of adequate, available, accessible health services, communication difficulties, the complexity of health problems, experiences of violence, misconceptions as to the sexuality of women with disability, lack of adequately trained health professionals, a lack of multidisciplinary focus and specialist skill in the health care system and a lack of research into the health needs of women with disability” (Frohman, 2019, p. 16).*

Women living with disability have reported that they do not feel heard when accessing healthcare services, feel that their issues are dismissed and that medical professionals interact with their partner, family and supports instead of with them directly. Participants with disability raised the issue of women with disability often not having control and choice when it comes to healthcare, particularly surrounding reproductive rights. Some participants of the forum with disability even recounted experiences of forced sterilization.

*‘Back in June of this year, I was privileged enough to be asked to sit on a panel at the Rural Doctors Association Conference in Queensland. They were doing a panel on power, privilege and discrimination, and they asked me to sit on the panel. In preparation for this engagement, I spoke to a lot of people about their experiences with the medical sector and how they feel their disability was a part of how they were treated. In the Women’s Strategy that I just read for today, it said that one in three women feel their concerns are dismissed by doctors, I found in my research that a lot more women with disability feel medically gaslit, dismissed, particularly when the doctor is male.’ So, for that one in three, you could probably double it to look at women with disability. ‘*

*Kate Dufty, QDN member and Emerging Leader graduate*

## **Solutions**

QDN participants at the forum identified the following key areas as priorities and actions for further development and discussion to support the implementation of the Queensland Women’s Strategy and progress this work led by women with disability.

### **More representation of women living with disability within leadership positions**

Having more women living with disability represented and recruited into leadership positions through incentives, increased opportunities and leadership programs can increase the disability lens on policies and procedures within government that impact women and girls as well as allowing

women and girls living with disability to ‘be what they can see’ and hold government accountable to upholding the rights of women and girls living with disability.

**Recommendation:**

Establish a roundtable with emerging leaders who are women living with disability to co-design and develop actions to support key areas of the Queensland Women’s Strategy for women and girls living with disability.

**Co-designing processes for government policies and procedures**

Having policies, procedures and plans that are co-designed with people living with disability are essential to capturing the voices of women living with disability in the Queensland Women’s Strategy.

**Recommendation:**

Develop an engagement strategy to develop key mechanisms for women and girls with disability through QDeNgage to support and co-design of policies, practice and research across government for women living with disability.

**More training**

Delivering training to business, services and the government sector around gender and disability discrimination can improve awareness and linking this training with measured outcomes, strategies and policies can keep businesses, services and the government sector accountable to upholding the rights of women and girls living with disability.

**Recommendation:**

Work with QDeNgage to promote awareness of training and disability awareness that can be delivered by our women leaders with disability.

**Increasing accessibility to safety and healthcare services**

Having more funding for legal services, accessible social housing as well as training for services around lived experience of disability can support the safety of women with disability experiencing violence and healthcare challenges.

**Recommendation:**

Building upon the strategies currently being delivered through domestic and family violence initiatives, explore options to enhance specialist disability support and disability-specific parenting support services for mothers can help keep women living with disability and their children safe and together.

## Conclusion

The key issues raised in this initial online forum for women with disability and policy highlight the need to address gaps surrounding economic security, safety of girls and women living with disability and accessible health services. Increased accessibility to health services, training to the business and government sector, representation of women living with disability in leadership positions as well as co-design processes for government and business policies and procedures are essential to achieving equality for women living with disability.

QDN looks forward to continuing this work, by and for women with disability and further engagement through more forums with key stakeholders to pursue these issues and recommendations and will continue to update members on this important issue.

## References

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2022), AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 07 September 2022.

Frohman, C. (2019). The status of women and girls with disability in Australia. *Position paper*.

Women with disability (2017). Retrieved September 15, 2022, from [Women with disability | Women's Workforce Participation Strategy \(pmc.gov.au\)](#)