

Experiences of Sex Workers with Disability

**Australian Disability Royal
Commission Summary Report**

Background

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (also known as the Australian Disability Royal Commission or the ADRC) was established by the Australian Government in 2019. It is an independent inquiry into the issues faced by people with disability in unceded Australia. The ADRC will give the Australian Government recommendations on changes to laws, policies, structures and practices in its final report in September 2023.

We talked to sex workers with disability about what it's like to be a disabled sex worker and how disability impacts life at work. This report is a summary of our submission to the ADRC, 'Experiences of sex workers with disability in Australia'.

We acknowledge and thank the sex workers with disability who generously shared their time and expertise on the project design and/or as part of the consultations. We hope this report will amplify the voices of sex workers with disability and provide a call to action within the sex worker community.

Sex workers with disability have different experiences of doing sex work

Sex workers with disability have lots of different reasons for choosing sex work. Many find that sex work is more flexible than other jobs. Others rely on sex work income to pay for disability-related expenses such as healthcare, especially because there are many barriers to accessing income support as a person with disability. Some sex workers also said that having a disability makes them better sex workers and gives them skills to be empathetic and compassionate, especially towards clients with disability.

'Sex work allowed me to work around my flare ups and child care options while making enough to be able to pay rent and buy groceries.'

'The sensitivities I have as a disabled sex worker translate well into skills needed throughout [sex work]. I do well de-escalating potentially tricky situations. I can support other workers and point them toward resources I've used myself. I am proud that my experience as a neurodivergent person has helped me to be a better provider, and to bring comfort to other people like me.'

Sex workers with disability come from diverse backgrounds

We heard from sex workers with disability living in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia and South Australia in urban, regional and rural areas. Ages ranged from 20 to over 50 years old.

Sex workers with disability do many different forms of sex work including independent sex work, brothel work, and online sex work; and disability impacts the types of sex work they do.

Sex workers with disability often have intersecting identities and experiences. Many are LGBTQI+, migrants, have experienced poverty or housing instability, have parenting or other care responsibilities, and/or use alcohol or other drugs.

For more information see: '[Who we spoke to](#)'

Sex workers with disability need the decriminalisation of their sex work and access to justice

The full decriminalisation of sex work and recognising sex work as work are essential steps towards improving disabled sex worker's access to appropriate healthcare, housing, and income support and improving the way sex workers with disability are treated by healthcare providers, government agencies and police. Sex workers with disability urge the ADRC to present sex work as work in their report and recommendations to government, because the entire disability support system in Australia needs to hear this message.

'When I was on Job Seeker in WA maybe 13 years ago, I couldn't attend an appointment with Centrelink because [I was working as a sex worker at that time]. I called to let them know and was honest about it, and was told that sex work wasn't considered work so I would be penalised for missing the appointment, but was reminded that I needed to report any income made from it.'

'I believe the only way forward, is full decriminalisation of sex work, and full workers' rights instated, this is the only way disability rights will be implemented for sex workers.'

More info: '[Laws, police and access to justice](#)'

Sex workers with disability face barriers in their workplaces

Some of the physical barriers sex workers face in the workplace include inaccessible buildings with stairs, narrow passageways or inaccessible bathrooms; dress codes that require workers to wear particular clothing like high heels; and lack of spaces for sex workers to rest between bookings.

'If you want to work at a brothel - can you get inside? Are you a wheelchair user and is the brothel able to accommodate your chair? Are there steps inside? Strobes, flashing lights, bright lights and loud noises can be very bad for epilepsy and sensory disabilities.'

Sex workers also told us that other barriers include long shift requirements, bosses or managers who will not accommodate sex workers' needs, and workplace discrimination or harm from managers, co-workers or clients:

'When I have experienced harm doing sex work, I don't always feel fully equipped to protect myself. I think a part of this is the lack of recognition of disability within establishments which leads to both management and other workers seeing you as a problem, attention seeker, dramatic and delusional - I get the overall impression that they view me as a burden because my health issues are beyond my control.'

More info: ['Experiences in sex work and other employment'](#)

Sex workers with disability experience stigma and discrimination

Stigma and discrimination impact all sex workers and can create unique harms for sex workers with disability. Nearly all sex workers we spoke with reported experiencing stigma when accessing healthcare.

Many sex workers reported they felt unable to disclose sex work status to health professionals or had to choose between disclosing disability or disclosing sex work. Many reported experiencing health professionals being overly focused on one of these identities while ignoring the other, missing an opportunity to see them as a whole person.

'Existing at the intersection of experiencing chronic illness and being a sex worker has made it incredibly difficult to get appropriate care. Medical professionals often separate 'sex work' and 'disability' into two distinct areas of health care.'

'A psychologist of mine once blamed all of my issues on my sex work...despite the fact that sex work is what allowed me to afford those sessions. They can be so out of touch.'

More info: ['Experiences of discrimination and stigma'](#) and ['Accessing health services'](#)

Sex workers with disability have a difficult time accessing government support

Sex workers with disability often find it hard to access basic income support to help cover the costs of living. Many do sex work to supplement financial supports and services such as the Disability Support Pension (DSP) and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), or because they are unable to access these supports in the first place. This traps sex workers with disability in a cycle of burnout that can feel inescapable.

'I know so many sex workers who should be on DSP, but only a handful have had success when applying.'

'I have been ill for 15 years but over the last few years, have experienced a significantly higher need for support and assistive devices and aids. After 5 failed applications to the NDIS and three appeals to review the decision, I am still trying.'

'I am...a migrant, so I'm not eligible for NDIS or any other disability payments, hence sex work is the only job that currently caters to my needs for flexible work.'

More info: ['Accessing government and financial support'](#)

What Happens Next

- The ADRC will consider the input from all submissions they receive and publish a final report in September 2023. The report will provide the Australian Government with recommendations for change that will benefit people with disability and the wider community. We will publish an update on the report to our blog when it becomes available, with specific information on its reference to sex workers with disability.
- Sex worker organisations, projects and groups are encouraged to read our report '[Experiences of sex workers with disability: Information for sex worker peer organisations](#)'. This was created as a resource sharing the knowledge, needs and experiences of sex workers with disability who participated in our consultations.
- Based on the feedback received during our consultations, Scarlet Alliance commits to the following actions we can take to better improve our engagement and representation of sex workers with disability:
 - We will provide disability awareness training for our staff, conducted by a disability rights organisation.
 - We will prepare and implement a disability access action plan for our work.

Read the Full Report

You can read our full report [here](#), and find a shareable PDF version of this summary report in our [Publications](#) section.