



History of pay equity in Western Australia

This fact sheet provides a brief history of equal pay and pay equity for Western Australian women.

- 1907** The history of pay inequity in Australia began with the Harvester case of 1907 that established a level of “fair wages and conditions” as the basic male wage of 7 shillings based on a man’s need to support his wife and family.
- 1912** The Fruitpickers case set three principles for the basic wage for adult female employees:
- females performing (unskilled) ‘female work’ (eg fruitpacking) should be paid a female rate which was determined on the basis of individual needs;
 - females performing ‘male work’ (eg blacksmiths) should be paid the same rate as males;
 - where males and females are in competition (eg fruitpicking) the male rate should apply to both.
- The basic female rate was tentatively set at 75% of the male basic wage.
- 1919** The Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission determined that women who perform ‘women’s work’ should be paid a basic female wage set at 54% of the male wage. While the basic male wage was paid regardless of a man’s marital status and family responsibilities, all working women were assessed as single and without dependents. A male cook, for example, earned £2 10s a week plus keep, a female cook £1 10s plus keep. Most women’s jobs were menial; they were paid poor wages and were susceptible to exploitation.
- In 1919, the Australia Conciliation and Arbitration Commission awarded equal pay in some cases but its motive was to protect the male breadwinner. There was a concern that employers would substitute females for males as cheaper labour if the Commission prescribed a rate lower than the male rate.
- 1920** Female teachers achieved equal pay with their male colleagues after going on strike.
- 1926** The State basic wage, established by the WA Arbitration Court, paid men £4 5s per week and women £1 5s 11d per week.
- 1943** The Women’s Employment Board was established during World War II to encourage women into the munitions industry. It increased the female basic wage to 75% of the male wage to attract women into the workforce to overcome wartime labour shortages. It also considered cases in which employers needed to employ women in jobs where no award for female rates existed.



- 1951** The federal post-war basic wage inquiry considered reinstating the 54% wage relativity. After much debate, the WA Arbitration Court decided to retain and extend the 75% ratio.
- 1960** A further adjustment was made to the basic wage to bring female workers within 75% of male workers.
- Equal pay week was celebrated in Perth by lobbying Federal and State politicians and raising public awareness about pay inequities. This event was celebrated throughout the 1960s until the principle of equal pay was accepted.
- 1961** Members of Parliament, journalists, pharmacists, policewomen and barmaids received 100% of the male basic wage for the first time.
- 1969** The Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission established a new principle of equal pay for equal work, except where the work in question was essentially or usually performed by women.
- 1972** The 1969 principle was widened to provide for equal pay for work of equal value.
- 1974** Australia ratified the International Labour Organisation Convention No 100 Equal Remuneration (1951). This is an international commitment to ensure women and men are paid equally for work of equal value.
- 1980** The WA Industrial Commission fixed the same minimum wage rate for both male and female adult employees based on federal principles.
- 1980s and 1990s** Further development of equal pay principles occurred through the National Wage cases in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These cases established appropriate relativities within awards, endorsed a Minimum Rates Adjustment Principle (which allowed equitable comparison of rates across awards). These decisions helped improve women's pay and provide recognition of their skills.
- 2002** The *Industrial Relations Act 1979* was amended to state that its objects include 'to promote equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value.'
- 2004** The Minister for Consumer and Employment Protection commissioned Dr Trish Todd and Dr Joan Eveline of the University of Western Australia to carry out a review on the gender pay gap. The Report on the Review of the Gender Pay Gap in Western Australia, tabled in State Parliament in November, contained a range of recommendations on how to reduce the gender pay gap.
- 2006** The Pay Equity Unit was established within the Labour Relations Division of the Department of Consumer and Employment Protection (now the Department of Commerce) to work with WA employers and the community to address pay equity.
- 2009** The Pay Equity Audit Tool developed by the WA Pay Equity Unit was adopted for national use by the federal Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency. The work of the Pay Equity Unit was incorporated into the broader functions of the Labour Relations Division at the Department of Commerce.