
Gender Pay Equity in Australia: Where Are We Now And Where Are We Heading?

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Abstract

In this article we consider the current trends in gender pay equity in Australia, identifying the lack of improvement, and indeed the recent deterioration, in the national gender wage ratio. We analyse the gender wage gap by industry, State, and labour force status and consider developments in the regulatory sphere and social context which have the potential to have an impact on gender pay equity. We conclude with a discussion of the future prospects for the gender wage gap.

1. Introduction

In considering gender pay equity in 2012, one can celebrate the outcome of the recent Equal Remuneration case involving workers in the social, community and disability services industry (the SACS industry), as well as the improved reporting requirements for employers proposed by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill 2012. In addition, the increased protections for low-paid workers introduced via the *Fair Work Act 2009* suggest that a more optimistic view of gender pay equity in Australia might be possible. When we turn, however, to the statistics (for example, as presented in Table 1 and Figure 1), any potential optimism is replaced by despondency and frustration. The statistics point to a gender wage gap (GWG) that appears stubbornly resistant to further gains. Furthermore, consideration of the social context reminds us that regulatory change alone is unlikely to be the full solution to such a problem. In the remainder of this article we overview trends in the GWG in Australia, and trends in key labour market indicators, and we conclude with a discussion on prospects for the GWG in the future. Concerns about gender pay equity are intertwined with concerns to improve work-and-family outcomes. Women's economic and financial security are central to good work-and-family policy; inequitable pay outcomes will not sustain women's participation in the labour market, in particular, in such critical sectors as care and health where their work has been undervalued historically.

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2. The Gender Wage Gap

The national gender wage gap is frequently used to measure the progress and status of women in the labour market. In November 2011 for full-time employees the raw GWG (that is, in the absence of any effort to control for male-female differences in characteristics such as education and experience) was 17.45 per cent (Table 1). In dollar terms, this translated to a GWG of \$247.90 per week. When calculated using total earnings the GWG in the full-time labour market increased to 20.80 per cent (Table 1); and 35.3 per cent, when measured using the average total earnings of full-time and part-time employees. This is not surprising, given that the majority of part-time employees are women.

Table 1: Adult Employees in Australia, Average Weekly Earnings and Gender Wage Gaps, November Quarter, 2011

	Men	Women	Gender Wage Ratio	Gender Wage Gap	\$-gender wage gap
	\$	\$	%	%	\$
Full-time adult ordinary-time earnings	1420.90	1173.00	82.55	17.45	-247.90
Full-time adult total earnings	1502.20	1189.40	79.20	20.80	-312.80
All employees total earnings	1251.80	810.20	64.70	35.30	-441.60

Source: ABS (2011a) Table 2, seasonally adjusted.

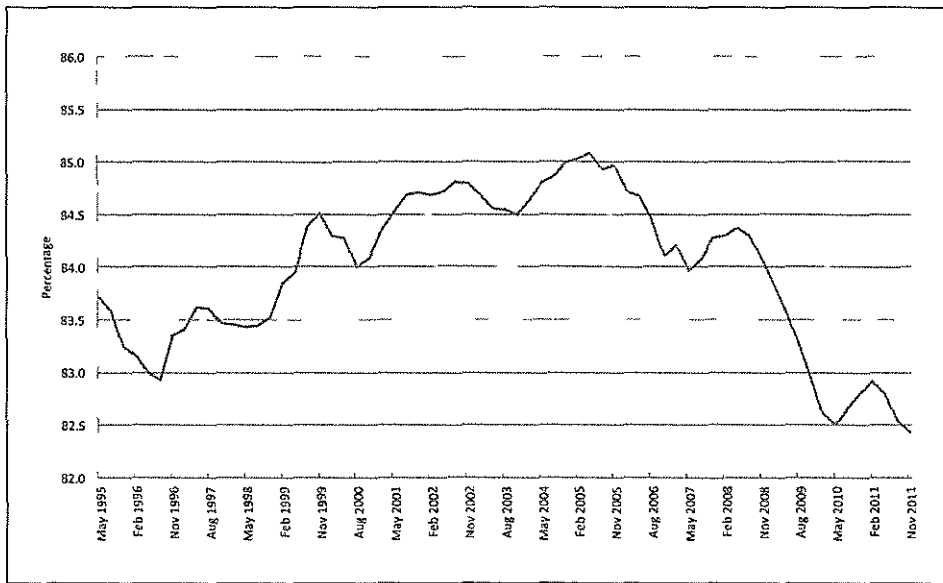
Note: The Gender Wage Ratio is calculated as the common ratio of female to male wages. The Gender Wage Gap (GWG) is the difference between parity (100%) and the gender wage ratio.

As noted earlier, the GWG has been fairly resistant to change in recent years. This is a global phenomenon which led the International Trade Union Confederation (2012) to suggest that the GWG has been 'frozen in time'. In August 1994, the GWG was 15.9 per cent; by November 2011 it was 17.4 per cent. Figure 1 shows the path of the GWG over the last 15 years. The recent deterioration since May 2008 is of considerable concern, as the change is statistically significant (at the 1 per cent level). We are now observing the worst GWG in nearly two decades.

It also has to be noted that most public discussion in Australia focuses around the calculation of the GWG based on ordinary-time full-time earnings (as per our previous paragraph). This approach ignores the reality of 'total earnings'

and excludes from the analysis the 46 per cent of women employees who work part-time. In addition, the measurement capability of the gender wage gap provides us with limited information on gender pay equity, as it is based on average-wage data. For example, the GWG in Australia differs between industries and sectors and from State to State. It also varies according to the method of wage determination: it is narrower for employees whose pay is determined only by the award; and it is greater for those in the higher paying individual and collective agreement streams. In addition, the size of the gap can vary between the lower and upper parts of the wage structure (Baron and Cobb-Clark 2010; Rubery, Grimshaw and Figueiredo 2002). Where the gender wage gap includes wage data for full-time and part-time employees, and permanent and casual employees, again we need to delve deeper to find whether there are differing trends between these groups.

Figure 1: The Gender Wage Ratio (and Gender Wage Gap) in the Full-time Labour Market: 1995-2011



Source: ABS (2011a). Seasonally-adjusted data smoothed using a four-quarter moving average.

Given this complexity, the GWG as a high-level indicator is likely to mask conflicting trends in gender pay equity. Improvements in pay equity amongst some groups will not be apparent if there is a comparable deterioration for other groups. That causal complexity means that any attempt to close the GWG must include a wide spectrum of strategies.

Of equal concern is the point that an improvement in the gender wage ratio may be driven by a deterioration in men’s wages, rather than an improvement

in women's wages, as was evidenced in the United States during the 1990s (Whitehouse 2003). Therefore, to assume that parity with the male average wage is necessarily the desired optimal outcome—particularly at the lower end of the wages distribution—can mean ignoring the growing inequities in wage dispersion. As Whitehouse (2003, p. 121) suggests, the concept of 'fair' wages becomes more important as wage dispersion increases.

Analysis by industry

Before considering what has been happening within individual industries, it is worth noting the trends in the public and private sectors. Full-time female employees in the private sector have experienced slower wage growth in recent years, 2006–11, relative both to male private sector employees, and to female and male employees in the public sector (Jefferson and Preston 2012). Clearly, this has contributed to the overall deterioration in the GWG.

Australia continues to have a much segmented labour force by industry and occupation. Table 2 shows that, for example, in mining 85.3 per cent of the hours worked are undertaken by men. Similarly, Table 3 (for occupations) shows that 65.4 per cent of all hours worked by managers were by men. Among community and personal-service workers, by contrast, women accounted for 68 per cent of all hours worked.

Tables 2 and 3 also show the changes in employment by industry and occupation that occurred between 2005 and 2011. When combined with data on changes in earnings (see Table 4), a level of explanation is provided for the deterioration in the GWG in recent times. For the period November 2009 to November 2011, the five industries with the largest increases in full-time earnings for both males and females were all male-dominated: wholesale trade, mining, construction, utilities, and transport. Second, health care and social assistance, highly feminised and the fastest growing industry sector in Australia (ABS cat. 6202) exhibited above average wage increases for males and below average increases for women. By November 2011, the gender wage ratio in this sector was equal to 67.5 per cent (a GWG of 32.5%), having deteriorated from a ratio of 70.6 per cent (and a gap of 29.4%) in November 2009. It should also be noted that the percentage increases in full-time earnings in the retail and accommodation and food sectors were much higher for females than for males. However, as both industries employ a high proportion of their workers on a part-time basis this provides only a partial picture of earnings outcomes in both sectors.

Table 2: Share of Total Hours Worked by Industry and Sex, May 2005 and May 2011

	May 2005		May 2011		May 2005		May 2011		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	Persons
	Row %		Row %		Column %		Column %		
Agriculture forestry and fishing	69.0	31.0	68.4	31.6	4.5	2.5	3.7	2.0	2.9
Mining	89.9	10.1	85.3	14.7	1.9	0.3	3.0	0.6	1.9
Manufacturing	73.5	26.5	74.2	25.8	13.9	6.1	11.6	4.9	8.5
Electricity, gas, water and waste services	78.4	21.6	72.9	27.1	1.4	0.5	1.8	0.8	1.3
Construction	86.0	14.0	88.2	11.8	13.4	2.7	14.9	2.4	9.2
Wholesale trade	68.9	31.1	66.6	33.4	4.6	2.5	4.3	2.6	3.5
Retail trade	45.0	55.0	45.1	54.9	9.8	14.7	8.9	13.0	10.8
Accommodation and food services	44.8	55.2	44.0	56.0	5.7	8.7	5.6	8.6	7.0
Transport, postal and warehousing	76.5	23.5	77.5	22.5	7.1	2.7	7.2	2.5	5.1
Information media and telecommunications	59.6	40.4	57.7	42.3	2.7	2.2	2.0	1.8	1.9
Finance and insurance services	44.9	55.1	46.2	53.8	3.0	4.5	3.2	4.5	3.8
Rental, hiring and real estate services	49.2	50.8	50.5	49.5	1.6	2.0	1.7	2.0	1.8
Professional, scientific and technical services	56.1	43.9	57.3	42.7	7.0	6.7	7.8	7.0	7.5
Administrative and support services	49.0	51.0	48.4	51.6	3.2	4.0	3.1	4.0	3.5
Public administration and safety	54.7	45.3	52.1	47.9	6.2	6.3	6.0	6.6	6.3
Education and training	32.6	67.4	30.8	69.2	4.3	10.8	4.4	11.8	7.8
Health care and social assistance	21.3	78.7	20.4	79.6	3.8	17.4	4.2	19.7	11.3
Arts and recreation services	50.3	49.7	56.3	43.7	1.6	1.9	2.0	1.9	2.0
Other services	60.5	39.5	61.5	38.5	4.4	3.5	4.5	3.4	4.0
Total Industry	55.1	44.9	54.5	45.5	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: ABS (2011b) Table 1.1

Notes: M = males; F = females

Table 3: Share of Total Hours Worked by Occupation and Sex, May 2005 and May 2011

	May 2005		May 2011		May 2005		May 2011		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	Persons
	Row %		Row %		Column %		Column %		
Managers	66.7	33.3	65.4	34.6	15.2	9.3	15.3	9.7	12.8
Professionals	49.3	50.7	48.1	51.9	17.8	22.4	19.3	25.1	21.9
Technicians and Trades Workers	85.8	14.2	87.3	12.7	23.6	4.8	23.6	4.1	14.7
Community and Personal Service Workers	31.7	68.3	32.3	67.7	4.9	12.8	5.6	14.0	9.4
Clerical and Administrative Workers	24.6	75.4	22.8	77.2	7.0	26.3	6.2	25.2	14.9
Sales Workers	38.7	61.3	38.7	61.3	7.4	14.3	6.7	12.6	9.4
Machinery Operators and Drivers	88.7	11.3	89.9	10.1	10.6	1.7	10.8	1.5	6.6
Labourers	66.3	33.7	65.8	34.2	13.5	8.4	12.5	7.8	10.4
Total Occupation	55.1	44.9	54.5	45.5	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: ABS (2011b) Table 12

Notes: M = males; F = females

Analysis by State

There are vast differences in the GWG between the States, ranging from just under 12 per cent in Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, up to 26.6 per cent in Western Australia (WA). WA has had a substantially worse GWG than the national average for several decades (Todd and Eveline 2004, 2007; Crockett and Preston 1999), having declined sharply during the early 1990s from 17.5 per cent in 1991 to 22.6 per cent in 2004 and, according to most recent estimates, it is now equal to 26.6 per cent (November 2011) (Table 5). It seems reasonable to surmise that the combined influence of the growth in the mining and resources sector and the accompanying labour shortages in WA are benefitting the male labour market far more than the female labour market. The other Australian State in which mining is prominent, Queensland, also has a GWG greater than the national average

Table 4: Changes in Average Weekly Ordinary-time Earnings (AWOTE) for Full-time Employees and the Gender Wage Ratio (GWR), by Industry, November 2009 to November 2011

	Change in AWOTE Nov 2009 to Nov 2011		GWR Nov 2011	Change in GWR Nov 2009 to Nov 11
	Males	Females	%	Percentage point
	%	%		
Mining	12.81	13.53	78.69	0.50
Manufacturing	5.91	4.22	80.98	-1.31
Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services	12.60	12.13	86.41	-0.36
Construction	10.06	12.42	81.36	1.71
Wholesale Trade	13.30	17.78	80.65	3.06
Retail Trade	1.66	11.22	93.22	8.02
Accommodation & Food	3.73	10.33	91.61	5.48
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	16.92	12.04	90.72	-3.95
Information Media and Telecommunications	6.21	3.28	80.41	-2.27
Financial and Insurance Services	11.69	6.70	68.38	-3.20
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	-3.65	4.40	74.88	5.78
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	9.08	8.96	73.49	-0.08
Administrative and Support Services	-4.96	-2.09	83.99	2.46
Public Administration and Safety	7.90	9.15	92.52	1.06
Education and Training	9.14	9.80	90.70	0.54
Health Care and Social Assistance	10.37	5.47	67.49	-3.14
Arts and Recreation Services	9.47	10.98	83.10	1.13
Other Services	1.70	11.10	88.67	7.50
All Industries	8.31	8.58	82.67	0.21

Source ABS (2011c) Table 10a and Table 10d, original series

but clearly not as large as in WA. While mining is clearly an influencing factor it is not the only factor underpinning WA's large GWG. Mining employs a relatively small proportion of the workforce in each State. Notwithstanding exceptionally strong economic growth in WA (equal to 11.1 per cent for the December 2011 quarter), a recent survey by the WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry points to weak consumer sentiment (Chamber of Commerce and Industry Western Australia 2012). A two-speed economy may be observed with women more likely to be working in sectors facing cost pressures, such as health, education, and retail.

In the full-time labour market, male employees in WA are earning 17.1 per cent more than their average Australian male counterparts, while the corresponding premium for WA female employees is only 4.1 per cent. Indeed, if we include all employees, then male workers in WA are earning 22 per cent more than the Australian male average and the WA female employees are almost on a par with their national counterparts, having a premium of only 0.4 per cent.

Table 5: Comparison of Full-time Adult Ordinary-time Earnings and the Gender Wage Gap, by State, November 2011

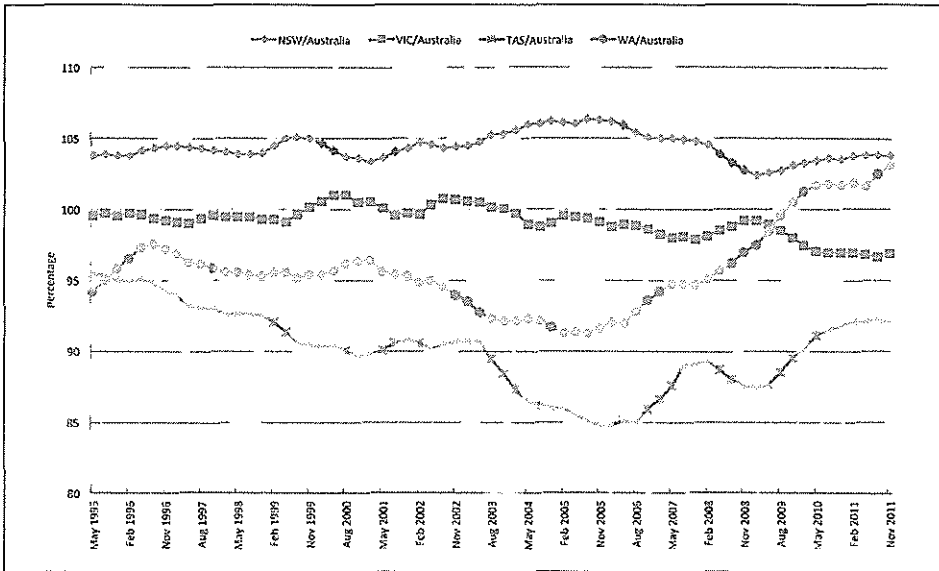
	Men \$	Women \$	\$-gender wage gap \$	Gender Wage Gap %
Australian Capital Territory	1626.4	1434.4	-192.0	11.8
Tasmania	1222.9	1077.6	-145.3	11.9
New South Wales	1392.6	1209.3	-183.3	13.2
South Australia	1282.4	1097.6	-184.8	14.4
Victoria	1376.9	1148.2	-228.7	16.6
Northern Territory	1496.8	1209.5	-287.3	19.2
Queensland	1408.6	1119.1	-289.5	20.6
Western Australia	1663.9	1221.3	-442.6	26.6
Australia	1420.9	1173.0	-247.9	17.45

Source: ABS (2011a)

Having noted the differences in size of the GWG between the States, it is also worth considering the substantial variance in trends in women's pay between the States. As can be seen in Figure 2, while Tasmania has a comparatively low GWG, the weekly ordinary-time earnings of full-time Tasmanian female employees are the lowest compared with the overall Australian female and male averages. On the other hand, while female employees in WA experience the largest GWG of any State, their wages have increased rapidly compared with their full-time Australian female and male counterparts, moving from the

second lowest in 2003 to the second highest in 2011. The greatest consistency can be observed in New South Wales (NSW) where the GWG is comparatively low and full-time female earnings have retained the highest ratio to their full-time female and male Australian counterparts.

Figure 2: Ratio of Female Full-time Average Weekly Ordinary-time Earnings (AWOTE) in Selected States to Female Full-time AWOTE for Australia (Total): 1995–2011



Source: ABS (2011a). Seasonally-adjusted data smoothed using a four-quarter moving average.

Analysis by labour force status

The rate of women’s participation in the labour force, at 59.1 per cent, continues to be at an all-time high for Australia, with men’s participation rate being 72.2 per cent (ABS 2012). The pattern of women’s participation is very different, however, to that of men, with 45.6 per cent of women employees working part-time compared with 19.3 per cent of men (ABS 2012). The negative impacts of part-time employment upon the quality of jobs, access to training and development, promotion, and career opportunities have been well-documented and recent Australian research affirms this (Charlesworth et al. 2011; Strazdins, Shipley, and Broom 2007; Healy and Webster 2012). Part-time employment is more likely to be casual and therefore less secure. Healy and Webster (2012) reported that between 1989–90 and 2009–10, hourly wages for women employees had increased by only 24 per cent compared with the increase of 32 per cent for full-time weekly earnings. The gap for men was not as great, with a 30 per cent increase in hourly wages during that period, compared with the 33 per cent increase for full-time weekly earnings.

Given that the propensity for women to be employed on a part-time basis is associated with motherhood, Charlesworth et al. (2011) focused their research on parents' working hours and job quality. Their findings presented a starkly gendered polarisation of the work/care regime in Australia, with 70 per cent of mothers working part-time and only 6 per cent of fathers doing likewise. Exacerbating the situation are the findings that a relatively high proportion of female part-time employees are working short hours (22 per cent of mothers are working 15 or fewer hours, compared with 1.3 per cent of fathers); at the other end of the hours spectrum, just over one-third of fathers are working 50 hours or more each week, compared with 3.7 per cent of mothers (Charlesworth et al. 2011).

Graduates' earnings

Recent statistics on graduates' earnings indicate that the GWG is likely to persist. The median starting salaries for female graduates younger than 25, and in their first full-time employment in 2011, were 96.2 per cent of those of their male counterparts. They earned an average of \$50,000 compared with the male graduate median of \$52,000 (Graduate Careers Australia 2011). Male graduates earned more than female graduates in 14 of the 23 fields listed in the survey, with the gap being 10 per cent or more in three fields (Earth Sciences, Architecture and Building, Economics and Business). Female graduates earned more than male graduates in six fields, with starting salaries of men and women being the same in the remaining three fields.

In 2009, the Graduate Pathways Survey (Coates and Edwards 2009, p. 92) revealed that five years after graduating, men were earning approximately \$7800 per annum more than women, after controlling for factors such as age, work hours, industry, occupation, current study and field of education. They found that there was a \$2000 gap in favour of men in their first year after graduating. This then grew to a \$3300 gap by the third year, and more than doubled by the fifth year. Female graduates were found to be earning less than male graduates in law, accounting, economics and business, architecture, and medicine, but earning slightly more in the agriculture and computer science fields. These findings raise many questions about the recruitment and remuneration practices of Australian organisations.

3. Recent Developments

Recent changes have made some incremental differences in the overall gender pay equity profile. The first of these to be considered here—the first Equal Remuneration case brought under the Equal Remuneration order provisions

in the *Fair Work Act 2009*—is a milestone in dealing with the undervaluation of women's work. The Full Bench of Fair Work Australia (FWA) decided in 2011 that employees in the SACS industry 'are generally remunerated at a level below that of employees of State and local governments who perform similar work' and that the disparity was partly due to gender (FWAFB 2700, 2011). The parties were requested to negotiate on the basis for, and the size of, the remedy for the Equal Remuneration order. Following the joint submission from the Federal Government and unions, in 2012, the majority of the Full Bench determined that pay rates for Levels 2 to 8 in the *Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award 2010* be increased by between 19 and 41 per cent. The Federal Government's announcement, subsequent to the 2011 decision, that it would fund its share of the increased costs was undoubtedly a critical step in the successful resolution of this case. The 2012 Decision will result ultimately in a substantial increase in remuneration for the SACS workers, but it is tempered by the FWA ruling that the increases be phased in over eight years.

The SACS case is testament to the improved equal remuneration provisions introduced by the *Fair Work Act 2009* which are a very positive development. This particular case was distinctive in its comparison of work in the non-government sector with similar work being performed by employees in the government sector. FWA Vice President Graeme Watson critiqued the use of this comparison in his dissenting Judgement in the 2012 FWA Full Bench Decision as not being about pay equity, but comparative wage justice (FWAFB 1000, 2012). In any event, in the interest of rectifying undervaluation of certain groups of women workers' jobs, it is anticipated that other cases will be pursued. Given the complexity of the process and the lack of inclusion of a pay-equity principle in the FWA Decision there is unlikely to be a flood of such claims.

The Fair Work Act introduced other provisions which have the potential to impact favourably on gender pay equity. These include the increased Safety Net covering provisions reinstating the payment of overtime and penalty rates in all modern awards, the preference for collective bargaining as the method to determine wages and conditions in place of individual agreement-making, the option for multi-employer bargaining in the low-paid sector, and very modest provisions to assist employees juggling work and care. The latter, combined with the new paid parental-leave scheme introduced by the *Paid Parental Leave Act 2010*, established a new policy basis for work and family (Baird and Williamson 2011). Systematic research will be necessary to assess the extent to which these reforms have an impact on gender pay equity.

Another development with direct implications for gender pay equity is the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill 2012, introduced by the Federal Government in March. This will establish the new Workplace Gender Equality Agency and make changes in the reporting to be completed by employers with more than 100 employees. The Bill follows the review of the *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999*. Of particular relevance is the inclusion of the following gender equality indicators on which companies will be required to report: 'equal remuneration between women and men', and the 'availability and utility of employment terms, conditions, and practices relating to flexible working arrangements for employees with family or caring responsibilities'. In introducing the Bill to the House of Representatives, the Minister for the Status of Women, Julie Collins MP, indicated that industry-specific minimum standards would be set against which organisations would be considered, and that organisations would be required to focus their reporting on the outcomes of their policies and practices, including pay data (Collins 2012). The industry focus of the performance indicators is a useful development, given the variance in the GWG across industries. However, the Agency will continue to be a 'light touch' regulator, as its Director described it (Conway 2012), with fairly weak penalties for non-compliance.

4. Future Prospects

Almost all analysts recognise the multiplicity and inter-connectedness of factors contributing to gender pay equity, including industry and occupation segmentation, undervaluation of women's jobs, the impact of part-time employment, institutional arrangements, organisational culture, and gendered societal norms and expectations (Todd and Eveline 2004; Rubery et al. 2002; House of Representatives Standing Committee of Employment and Workplace Relations 2009). It is the complexity of the GWG which often makes it so daunting to consider. Gains in one arena are offset by outcomes to the detriment of women in another. Given the dismal trends in the Australian GWG over the past several decades, is there any reason for optimism? Is the GWG a priority issue in the eyes of governments, organisations, and society?

The position of the current Federal Labor Government is somewhat contradictory. Its support for the SACS case—and eventual promise of funding—and the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill, currently before Parliament, reflects a greater acknowledgement of the need to improve the position of women in Australian workplaces. The present Government seems less willing to subscribe to the previous government's image of women as primarily 'mums supplementing the family income with part-time work' (Brennan 2007),

although the extent to which they are willing to challenge this view is not clear. There is much more to be done in the regulatory environment to deal with the serious paid work/care dilemma that operates disproportionately to the detriment of women workers (Strazdins et al. 2007). A government prioritising gender pay equity could utilise existing legislation more rigorously to compare, for example, the penalty rates and non-standard hours provisions across modern awards. The Federal Government's continued silence on its own worthy and extensive gender pay equity report, *Making it Fair* (House of Representatives Standing Committee of Employment and Workplace Relations 2009), is extremely disappointing and could be interpreted as indicative of the Government's reluctance to engage with the broad concept of gender pay equity. Governments tend to prefer tangible goals achievable in the short term and might be expected therefore to avoid committing to such a monolithic goal as reducing the GWG.

Public and private sector corporations are keen to increase women's participation in the labour force given the looming (and in some areas current) labour shortages (for example, Chamber of Commerce and Industry Western Australia 2010; Australian Women in Resources Alliance AWRA 2012). Yet most are unwilling to change their employment practices and organisational culture, which in the main still reflect male-centric work organisation, attitudes, and behaviours. While a minority of organisations have completed pay equity audits (for examples, see www.eowa.gov.au/Pay_equity/Pay_equity_site.asp), exhortations to complete such audits—a starting point for any organisation earnest in its desire to deal with gender pay inequity—are generally met with the occasional expression of interest but more usually silence or resistance.

The attitudes and behaviours of governments do not exist in a vacuum; the dominant culture and social discourse play critical roles in influencing whether gender pay equity is a priority. While most commentary suggests that Australian society supports the removal of discrimination against women employees, it seems that many continue to fail to understand the causes of the GWG (Conway 2012). The lack of awareness of the GWG is often linked to views about the role of women; for those who presume women's primary role to be the family carer, they are not surprised by women's diminished returns in the paid workforce (Todd and Eveline 2004).

Recent research (van Egmond et al. 2010) confirms that Australian society has become more and more egalitarian in its views towards women's employment outside the home. This is evidenced in the rise of dual-earner families, which has created the potential to reduce gender inequality. This change in attitude, however, has not been accompanied by changes in presumptions about gender roles in the family. Thus, society is generally

supportive of women's participation in paid work, as long as it does not interfere with their primary role as mother (van Egmond et al. 2010); and research confirms that mothers continue to assume primary responsibility for the care of young children (Craig and Bittman 2008).

Van Egmond et al. (2010) conclude that the trend towards more liberal attitudes about gender arrangements in Australia has stalled, and in some cases reversed, since the mid-1990s, paralleling trends in other Western nations. They attribute this to a number of factors in Australia including the previous Federal Government's social policies which supported the male-breadwinner model of family life; ongoing public discussions about fertility, and the need for women not to delay motherhood; and a much less active feminist movement. In addition, they suggest that the difficulties associated with juggling paid work and family, given the lack of support for a reasonable work-life balance, are resulting in some perhaps abandoning the notion that both are achievable. Their conclusions that 'women's movement into paid employment has been accepted largely because it has not challenged traditional divisions of labour'; and that 'there is less support than in the past for family arrangements that diverge from the male-breadwinner model and increasingly less support for combining motherhood with paid employment' (van Egmond et al. 2010, p. 165), do not augur well for pressuring governments and organisations to be more proactive in dealing with gender pay equity.

5. Conclusion

A GWG of 17.45 per cent based on full-time adult ordinary-time earnings in Australia and of 35.30 per cent when including the total earnings of all employees should be of major concern to policy makers in terms of equity and efficiency. Even more alarming is that gender pay equity has been deteriorating, rather than improving. For those who are concerned to improve gender pay equity, the single GWG statistic is not particularly helpful as it disguises more than it reveals. While it does provide an overall indicator, more public reporting of the GWG at industry, occupation, and State level would achieve a more tangible focus. It would enable recognition of improvements in particular sectors or locations and, on the other hand, identification of areas where pay inequity is increasing. As others have noted previously, much more detailed analysis by industry, occupation, and State is essential if we are to identify the actions needed to deal with the inequity correctly (House of Representatives Standing Committee of Employment and Workplace Relations 2009)—for example, what might other States learn from NSW, given that the latter has a substantially lower GWG? Governments and organisations are unlikely to be embarrassed into taking action by the

national gender wage-ratio statistic, partly as their individual actions are unlikely to have an impact on it. More nuanced statistics, including data that capture developments in the part-time labour market, may have some chance of encouraging particular sectors to adopt greater responsibility for pay-equity outcomes.

We have noted in the article the varying trends and outcomes in the public and private sectors, between industries, between States, and employment status (full-time versus part-time). In addition, the inclusion of statistics on graduate earnings point to gender inequity occurring for many at the entry point to the labour market. We have outlined several positive developments within the Australian regulatory regime, each of which contributes in some small part to improving gender pay equity.

We remain unconvinced, however, that gender pay equity is a high priority for governments and organisations in Australia, despite their desire to increase women's participation in the paid labour market. The lack of pressure from the broader community to enable further change to gender roles in the home and paid workforce suggests that any change, if it is to occur, will proceed in a minimalist fashion. The present Australian Government has shown that it will make piecemeal changes in response to sustained lobbying, but there is no indication of sufficient interest or political will to deal with gender pay equity in a more holistic way.

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