



**Our Work ... Our Lives:  
National Conference on Women and Industrial Relations**

Queensland Working Women's Service and Griffith Business School  
Griffith University  
Brisbane 12-14 July 2006

Paper for Plenary 5: Women, Work and Welfare Panel

**National Foundation for Australian Women**

**The What Women Want Project:  
2005-6 and 2006-7**

Background Papers are at

<http://www.nfaw.org/social/www/index.html>

**Marie Coleman (National Foundation for Australian Women)**

In June 2005 a coalition of over sixty national women's organisations formed to explore the impacts on women (young, with children, with disabilities - the full range) of the Federal Government's Welfare to Work and WorkChoices policies.

The NFAW helped to coordinate the first phase of the project, which included two national information workshops, together with publications and promotion of research NFAW had commissioned from the National Centre for Economic and Social Modelling (NATSEM) on the impacts of proposed policy changes on sole parents and on women with a disability.

We benefited greatly in that process on assistance and input from Sue Salthouse of Women With Disabilities Australia.

The money to pay for the commissioned research came from philanthropic donations to NFAW from individuals and organisations. As well, the University of Canberra matched our money, so that we were treated as industry research partners.

Through the good offices of The Hon. Judy Moylan MP we met with and briefed Government back-bench members on our concerns and research findings. Similarly, we briefed the Australian Democrats and the Australian Labor Party members and Senators. We gave evidence to the Senate Community Affairs Committee Inquiry into Work Choices. We met with Ministers to outline our concerns. Family First helped us by arranging for a Committee Room for a press conference, at no cost to us.



The women's organisations were not so much objecting to the principles of the policy objectives underlying either change, as concerned to understand the likely impacts on women, and to try to obtain

Government concessions which would protect the most vulnerable.

Subsequently, the Government made some modifications to its initial Welfare to Work proposals, although not so as to vary the lower income level to which new applicants and those people now placed onto Newstart Allowance would receive, compared to previous levels of income and different taper rates on the sole parent and disability pensions.

Minister for Workforce Participation, Dr Sharman Stone, will I assume clarify the position as it is now.

In June 2006 the same group of organisations reviewed the developments, and agreed to undertake further work. By now, the connection between the changes to industrial relations as to minimum wages and conditions and issues bearing on women's bargaining powers, and the Welfare to Work changes were becoming clear to many people. Previously, the welfare sector know about their concerns, the industrial relations knew about their concerns, but there seemed to have been little cross fertilisation.

We have a steering group for this phase of What Women Want, again comprised of individual representatives of the organisations affiliated with the four secretariats for national women's groups funded by the Commonwealth Office for Women.

Security for Women (S4W), one of the four, is providing the coordination for this phase of the project.

The priority areas for work identified by What Women Want are the income supports available through apprenticeship wages and Government benefits to assist adult (women) who wish to undertake re-training or re-skilling, and the development of a better understanding of women's wages and conditions.

I want to publicly express my appreciation of the courtesy shown to us in this phase of the project by Dr Stone, and the assistance generously provided by her Office in ensuring that our public papers are free of inaccuracies as to the current Government policy on Welfare to Work.

Julia Perry will expand further on the issues of income supports for adults seeking to re-train. The issues of concern she will raise are of course ours, and not be attributed to Dr Stone or her Office.

Now NFAW and the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) have joined with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) to benchmark women's wages and conditions. Research has been commissioned from the research consortium Women in Social and Economic Research (WiSER) based at Curtin University of Technology, to be carried out by industrial relations and workforce researchers in Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales.



The first part of the study will develop the first publicly available national data base on current awards and conditions for women, especially focussed on vulnerable groups of women such as migrants, young women, and women with a disability.

We anticipate a report, including the development of a new Women's Employment Status Key Indicators (WESKI) which will prove a useful research tool for further follow up studies.

The women's organisations will make a submission based on this research to the Fair Pay Commission on the differential between male and female wages and working conditions.

Our related project is to further contract a national study from the WiSER consortium to carry out 100 in depth interviews of individual women, across five states. We want to understand much more of these women's understandings of wages and conditions; whether their hours worked are family friendly; and the particular issues facing low paid women of migrant background, women with disabilities, and young women.

The NFAW, and the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) are now working to raise \$75,000 to expand their joint research studies into women's wages and conditions.

WEL and NFAW are in discussion with several other national community organisations to form a consortium to manage the interview phase of the research.

Jenny Earle, on behalf of WEL, has said 'This research will enable us to identify the impacts on women of changes to our workplace relations framework. Women generally have less bargaining power at work so safety net pay and conditions are vital. It will be great to have more detailed and reliable national data on women's employment experiences.'

For myself, speaking on behalf of NFAW, I have said 'We are committed to having a sound research base on which to develop social policy analysis. These studies will give us all an unbiased view of how working women's wages and conditions are changing.'

I want to encourage people at this conference to make a donation to help us to proceed with this project.

**Donations to the NFAW are tax deductible. Donations should be marked "workplace study" and sent to the NFAW.**

**Further information**

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**For information about the research, and how to donate, go to**

**[www.nfaw.org](http://www.nfaw.org) or call (02) 4422 2208**

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