



RESEARCH NOTE

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Economic Status of Women in Australia: A Statistical Profile

Women and employment

The participation of women in the paid labour force has increased steadily: in April 1995, 53.8 per cent of women aged 15 years and over were participating in the paid labour force, compared with 52.5 per cent in February 1994, 49.3 per cent in February 1988, and 44.7 per cent in July 1983. The proportion of women in the paid labour force in Australia is lower than in Great Britain and Canada among Commonwealth countries, and lower than in a number of other OECD countries including the United States of America and Scandinavian countries. Women predominate in the part-time labour force.

Since late 1990 the unemployment rate of women has been lower than the male unemployment rate. The unemployment rate of women fell from 10.4 per cent in February 1983 to 8.1 per cent in February 1988 and was at its lowest in the past twelve years at 6.4 per cent in December 1989. In February 1994

it rose again to 9.9 per cent, was 8.9 per cent in February 1995 (see Table 1) and fell further to 8.0 per cent in May 1995. However, women still predominate among discouraged job seekers, i.e. in 'hidden unemployment'. In September 1994, of 106 500 persons classified as discouraged job seekers by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 70 per cent were women.

Despite 'equal pay' decisions dating back to 1969, women still have not achieved wage parity. For adult employees, in February 1995, women's full-time average ordinary time weekly earnings were 84 per cent of men's. For adult full-time average total weekly earnings the female/male proportion was 79 per cent and for all employees average total weekly earnings, the female/male proportion was 66 per cent. These ratios are much the same as in February 1988. The female/male proportion for all employees average total weekly earn-

ings in May 1975 was 67 per cent so this has changed little in the past 20 years.

The latest earnings distribution figures, for August 1994, show that 63.1 per cent of workers with earnings in their main or only job of under about \$96 per week (\$5 000 per annum) were women, and only 18.7 per cent of people with earnings in their main or only job of about \$766 per week (\$40 000 per annum) and over were women.

Reasons for the disparity in wage levels include the lower awards for traditionally female occupations, the high degree of occupational and industry segregation of women workers, and the predominance of women in part-time employment. Australia has the highest incidence of occupational segregation of the OECD countries, and one of the highest incidences of industrial segregation. Women are over-represented in the lowest paid jobs (traditional female occupations).

TABLE 1. WOMEN AND THE LABOUR FORCE
(per cent)

| Characteristic | February– | | | | | |
|---|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1975 | 1980 | 1985 | 1990 | 1994 | 1995 |
| Female proportion of the civilian population aged 15 years and over | 50.8 | 50.8 | 50.7 | 50.6 | 50.8 | 50.8 |
| Female proportion of the labour force | 35.2 | 36.8 | 38.4 | 41.6 | 42.3 | 42.6 |
| Participation rate (a): | | | | | | |
| males | 81.5 | 78.3 | 75.8 | 75.5 | 73.7 | 74.3 |
| females | 43.2 | 44.4 | 46.1 | 52.3 | 52.5 | 53.5 |
| Female proportion of employment: | | | | | | |
| full-time | 27.2 | 28.3 | 29.5 | 31.6 | 32.6 | 32.4 |
| part-time | 80.9 | 78.9 | 78.7 | 78.1 | 75.0 | 74.7 |
| total | 34.3 | 36.0 | 38.0 | 41.1 | 42.6 | 42.5 |
| Unemployment rate (a): | | | | | | |
| full-time workers–males | 3.6 | 4.9 | 8.1 | 5.6 | 11.1 | 8.9 |
| –females | 6.7 | 8.7 | 10.1 | 7.7 | 11.8 | 10.3 |
| part-time workers–males | 9.3 | 6.7 | 7.8 | 8.5 | 9.3 | 9.6 |
| –females | 6.8 | 5.7 | 6.9 | 6.3 | 7.0 | 6.9 |
| total–males | 3.8 | 5.0 | 8.1 | 5.9 | 10.9 | 9.0 |
| –females | 6.8 | 7.7 | 8.9 | 7.2 | 9.9 | 8.9 |

(a) Seasonally adjusted.

Source: *The Labour Force*, various (ABS).

TABLE 2. FEMALE EMPLOYMENT: PROPORTION IN INDUSTRIES

(per cent)

| Industry division | February— | | | | |
|---|-----------|------|------|------|------|
| | 1980(a) | 1985 | 1990 | 1994 | 1995 |
| Agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting | | 26.1 | 29.8 | 31.3 | 31.6 |
| Mining | 5.3 | 8.7 | 12.0 | 12.7 | 11.4 |
| Manufacturing | | 26.2 | 26.9 | 26.3 | 26.5 |
| Electricity, gas, water | 8.4 | 8.1 | 8.7 | 14.7 | 14.9 |
| Construction | | 12.2 | 12.9 | 14.2 | 14.9 |
| Wholesale trade | | 28.6 | 31.8 | 31.3 | 29.3 |
| Retail trade | | 50.6 | 51.8 | 50.4 | 50.9 |
| Accommodation, cafes, restaurants | 57.9 | 55.4 | 57.7 | 57.9 | 53.6 |
| Transport and storage | | 15.0 | 19.8 | 22.9 | 21.9 |
| Communication | | 26.2 | 27.3 | 31.4 | 30.1 |
| Finance and insurance | | 49.6 | 54.0 | 55.3 | 57.9 |
| Property and business services | | 40.3 | 43.2 | 43.1 | 44.6 |
| Government administration and defence | 35.2 | 35.7 | 39.8 | 40.7 | 40.6 |
| Education | | 60.3 | 64.4 | 64.7 | 64.2 |
| Health and community services | | 74.1 | 74.6 | 75.5 | 77.3 |
| Culture and recreational services | | 44.5 | 46.6 | 49.3 | 50.5 |
| Personal and other services | | 55.5 | 57.0 | 55.9 | 49.2 |

(a) Changes in the classification of industry have resulted in estimates not shown being unavailable.

Source: *The Labour Force*, various (ABS).

Two-thirds of women workers are concentrated in five occupational groups: teaching, nursing, clerical, sales and personal service provision. They are under-represented in many occupations such as engineering, science and technology positions, and trades. In February 1995, for example, only 10.7 per cent of tradespersons were women, while 77.2 per cent of clerks were women. Within industries, women tend to be clustered at the lowest salary levels.

Income

Of persons who had some earned income in 1989-90, i.e. wage and salary earners, the mean gross total income (from **all** sources) of women was only 63.2 per cent of the average (mean) for men. Data from the 1991 Census shows that, for people who stated their income,

the distribution of total gross incomes from **all** sources is distorted against women: 68.7 per cent of people with annual incomes of \$5 000 or less were women (63.3 per cent up to \$12 000) whilst only 17.4 per cent of people with incomes above \$40 000 were women (14.2 per cent above \$50 000).

Women and poverty

In Australia, in June 1994 women made up about 58.2 per cent of Australia's adult (civilian) pensioners and beneficiaries, and 94 per cent of sole parent **pensioner** families were headed by women. Single parent families were over-represented at the lowest income levels and therefore those most likely to be living below poverty level standards were women and children. Of all families with dependent children, 18.6 per cent are

sole parent families, and of these about 87.7 per cent are headed by women.

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TABLE 3. WOMEN AND INCOME, 1991

| Annual gross income(a) (\$) | Men | | Women | | All persons | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| | Number ('000) | Prop. of total (%) | Number ('000) | Prop. of total (%) | Number ('000) | Prop. of total (%) | Prop. who were women (%) |
| 0 — 5 000 | 603.2 | 10.1 | 1 323.8 | 22.4 | 1 927.1 | 16.3 | 68.7 |
| 5 001 — 12 000 | 1 371.0 | 23.1 | 2 087.5 | 35.3 | 3 458.5 | 29.2 | 60.4 |
| 12 001 — 20 000 | 1 075.0 | 18.1 | 1 142.5 | 19.3 | 2 217.5 | 18.7 | 51.5 |
| 20 001 — 30 000 | 1 403.1 | 23.6 | 866.0 | 14.7 | 2 269.1 | 19.1 | 38.2 |
| 30 001 — 40 000 | 778.4 | 13.1 | 336.6 | 5.7 | 1 114.9 | 9.4 | 30.2 |
| 40 001 — 50 000 | 338.0 | 5.7 | 87.7 | 1.5 | 425.6 | 3.6 | 20.6 |
| 50 001 and over | 376.9 | 6.3 | 62.5 | 1.1 | 439.4 | 3.7 | 14.2 |
| Total (b) | 5 945.6 | 100.0 | 5 906.6 | 100.0 | 11 852.2 | 100.0 | 49.8 |

(a) From all sources. (b) Excludes 'not stated'.

NOTE. This table relates to people aged 15 years and over only.

Source: Census of Population and Housing, 6 August 1991 (ABS).