

# **WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S BOOM ECONOMY: INSIGHTS FROM THREE STUDIES**

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The term “boom” is frequently used to refer to the Western Australian economy and, given current levels of activity in WA’s mining sector, this is hardly surprising. In response to increased demand for mineral and petroleum products, particularly from China, the annual value of production in these sectors exceeded forecasts for 2006/07 and increased over the previous year by 24.7 per cent, or \$10.6 billion (WA Department of Industry and Resources 2007). In September 2007, the State’s labour force participation rate of 68.8 per cent was the highest recorded since the monthly data series commenced in 1978 and was higher than all other States. At 3.5 per cent, the State’s unemployment rate was the lowest in Australia and job advertisements were consistently at historically high levels (WA Department of Treasury and Finance 2007). In general, Western Australia exhibits features consistent with the colloquial label “boom economy”.

The rewards of Western Australia’s minerals boom are, however, unevenly distributed. Women’s labour market experiences are one example. In this article we compare and contrast insights from three diverse research projects that have examined specific aspects of WA women’s employment experiences and expectations. Firstly, we review patterns in WA’s gender wage gap during two waves of industrial relations reform, one at the State level and one Federal. At an aggregate level, this demonstrates a relatively inequitable sharing of the rewards from economic growth that appears linked to specific forms of employment contract (Preston and Jefferson 2007). Secondly, we overview insights into the experiences of women working in low paid sectors of the WA labour market (Jefferson, Preston, Chapple-Fahlesson,

and Mitchell 2007). Thirdly, we discuss a study of young women who are undergraduate students considering careers in the minerals sectors. The study gives insights into young women's opportunities to engage in minerals industry employment as a direct means of sharing in the wealth being generated by the mineral and energy boom (Lord, Preston, and Crosbie 2007).

Viewed together, the three studies – described in greater detail elsewhere - demonstrate the diverse range of women's experiences of WA's economy and illustrate some of the policy challenges for both the private and public sectors as they attempt to address current and future labour market issues.

### **Study 1: Western Australia's Gender Wage Gap**

A buoyant minerals and energy sector has not been the only influence on Western Australia's labour market in recent years. Since the early 1990s, Western Australia has experienced a range of labour market reforms that have prioritized individual agreement making in place of formerly traditional, collective approaches. The shift toward individual agreement making, alongside a range of other labour market reforms, occurred at both the State level (1993- 2002) and the Federal level (1996- current).

Australian Bureau of Statistics earnings data indicate that these institutional changes have coincided with a growing gender pay gap in Western Australia (Preston and Jefferson 2007).

Columns 1 and 2 in Table 1 (on the following page) show the gender wage ratio of women's to men's Average Weekly Ordinary Time Earnings (AWOTE) for both Australia and WA. The second column shows that the relative pay position of women in WA deteriorated in two particular periods, 1992-4 and 2002-6. By May 2007 the gender pay gap, defined as the percentage difference between women's and men's average full time, weekly ordinary time earnings, was equal to 25.9 per cent in WA, compared with a national estimate of 16.8 per cent.

**Table 1: Average Weekly Ordinary Time Earnings Ratios for Adult, full-time employees, Australia & Western Australia 1990-2007**

	Gender Wage Ratio (%)		WA/National Wage Ratios (%)	
	1 Australia	2 WA	3 Men	4 Women
1990	83.0	80.6	101.0	98.0
1991	84.2	81.2	102.5	98.9
1992	83.4	81.3	101.5	98.9
1993	84.0	78.2	101.8	94.7
1994	84.2	77.2	102.7	94.1
1995	83.3	77.2	102.9	95.4
1996	83.4	77.7	104.0	96.9
1997	83.5	77.8	102.5	95.4
1998	83.6	77.1	103.3	95.4
1999	84.4	78.6	102.8	95.6
2000	84.0	78.1	104.2	96.8
2001	84.6	78.8	103.1	96.0
2002	84.7	78.9	101.7	94.8
2003	84.5	77.1	102.0	93.1
2004	84.9	76.4	103.3	93.0
2005	84.9	75.1	105.3	93.2
2006	84.0	74.4	107.9	95.5
May-07	83.8	74.1	109.7	97.1
% -point change				
1991-1995	-0.9	-4.0	0.4	-3.5
1996-2000	0.6	0.5	0.1	0.0
2001-2005	0.3	-3.6	2.2	-2.8
2006-2007	-0.3	-0.3	1.8	1.6

Source: ABS 6302.0 (spreadsheets 6302002.xls and 63020012e.xls).

Note: data are seasonally adjusted and comparisons are based on average annual estimates. Reproduced from Preston and Jefferson (2007)

While it is sometimes suggested that declining gender wage ratios reflect the relatively low numbers of women employed in the highly paid minerals and energy sector, this is only part of the story. This can be illustrated by comparing the earnings of WA women with women nationally, which provides a form of control for different industry effects on the wages of women and men. Column 4 of Table 1 compares WA women's earnings with the average earnings of all Australian women and shows significant deterioration in the relative pay of WA women relative to Australian women in the early 1990s and again from 2002. These changes are not driven by developments in the mining industry. Nor are they accounted for by changes in the human capital characteristics such as the education or workforce experience levels of WA women relative to Australian women. These changes would not impact so strongly in such a short period of time<sup>1</sup>.

Insights can also be gained by comparing hourly earnings data, which allows us to examine the average earnings of employees in the full-time and part-time sectors of the labour force. Table 2 sets out the average hourly cash earnings (adjusted for salary sacrificing) of men and women in Australia and WA in 2006. When the analysis is restricted to non-managerial employees and based on hourly cash earnings rather than AWOTE a different picture emerges. The first and perhaps most obvious feature is that the gap in the earnings of Western Australian women relative to women nationally almost disappears. The second is that, when different forms of employment contract are considered, significant gender differences exist for some forms of contract compared with others.

WA women on awards and unregistered individual agreements earn between four and six per cent less than women nationally. There is a minimal gender wage gap among those on these forms of contract, both in WA and nationally. The story is less positive for workers covered by other agreement forms. AWAs (registered individual agreements) have the worst outcomes. Nationally, the AWA gender pay gap is around 20 per cent. In Western Australia the AWA gender pay gap is closer to 37 per cent.

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1 Further details on weekly earnings for different occupational and industry groups for most of this period are available in Preston and Plowman (2005).

**Table 2: Average Hourly Cash Earnings (A\$), Non-Managerial Adult Employees, May 2006**

	Australia		WA		GWR		Females
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Australia	WA	WA/Australia
	A\$	A\$	A\$	A\$	%	%	%
Award only	18.00	18.60	16.60	17.80	103.3	107.2	95.7
Registered collective agreements	28.70	25.70	29.10	25.60	89.5	88.0	99.6
Unregistered collective agreements	23.60	20.70	28.00	20.20	87.7	72.1	97.6
Registered individual agreements	28.10	22.80	36.70	23.20	81.1	63.2	101.8
Unregistered individual arrangements	27.20	23.10	28.90	21.90	84.9	75.8	94.8
<b>All methods of setting pay</b>	26.30	23.20	28.80	23.10	88.2	80.2	99.6

Source: 6306.0 Reproduced from Preston and Jefferson (2007)

Compared with the other states and territories, WA's record with respect to gender equality (as measured by the gender pay gap) is disappointing. We suggest that institutional factors have played an important role in this. In Table 1, the first period of gender wage ratio decline coincides with the introduction of individual contracts in Western Australia and a strong growth in individual agreements in sectors such as health services and retail trade (Crockett and Preston 1999). The more recent improvement in the pay position of women in WA relative to women nationally may relate to recent legislative changes in the federal jurisdiction, the removal of award protection (through the year-long removal of the no-disadvantage test) and possible deterioration in Australian women's wages as a result.

Our suggestion that wage setting institutions and minimum wage laws are particularly important for gender wage ratios is consistent with previous findings from both Australia and overseas (Gregory 1999:277). Decentralised approaches to wage determination are generally less favourable to women, particularly women on relatively low earnings, compared with centralised wage fixing systems (Blau and Kahn 1992;

Gregory and Daly 1990, 1992; Rubery 1992; Whitehouse 1992). Previous research in Western Australia is also consistent with the national and international literature. It has been demonstrated that there are links between the increasing use of individual agreements and of a growing low-wage labour market segment (Bailey and Horstman 2000). It has also been shown that Western Australian Workplace Agreements did little to increase the use of negotiated employment contracts but, instead, extended managerial prerogative to increasingly adopt unilateral approaches of defining wages and working conditions (Berger 2000).

There are, of course, limits to the extent to which all women's labour market experiences are reflected by estimates of average earnings and average gender wage ratios such as those used above. The situation is likely to vary significantly between women, with those at the lower end of the earnings distribution likely to be more disadvantaged than others (Gregory 1999; Whitehouse 2001). Further, wages are only one indicator of labour market outcomes. Pocock and Masterman-Smith make the important point that those on relatively low earnings are also likely to experience unsocial or unpredictable working hours and greater difficulty balancing paid work and household caring responsibilities (Pocock and Masterman-Smith 2005). In the following sections we provide overviews of two studies that examine specific labour market sectors.

### **Study 2: Women working for Minimum Conditions in Western Australia**

The second study looks at the labour market experiences of WA women working in labour market sectors that typically rely on minimum conditions of employment to define their standard wages and conditions. The study was prompted by the introduction of the Commonwealth Government's *WorkChoices* legislation. At the time of introduction there were concerns about the possible effects of the *WorkChoices* reforms on particular groups of vulnerable or 'at risk' workers such as women in low paid jobs with weak bargaining power. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, the National Foundation for Australian Women and the Women's Electoral Lobby jointly commissioned a report examining the ways in which women's labour market experiences under *WorkChoices* might be monitored (Preston, Jefferson, and Seymour 2006).

The key finding of this report was that whilst some high quality, nationally representative data did exist, it was not sufficient to provide an adequate account of the wide ranging changes to the arrangement of working conditions that might be negotiated under the 2006 regulations. The authors recommended that a national program of case study and interview-based research be undertaken to further understand the effects of *WorkChoices*. Funding for interview-based research was subsequently provided through a range of State government departments and, in the case of WA, jointly through the Office for Women's Policy and Curtin University of Technology. Complementary research was undertaken by teams in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Australian Capital Territory (Elton, Bailey *et al*, 2007).

The Western Australian report centred on findings from interview based research with low paid women workers in Western Australia. An inductive, qualitative research method was used to construct key insights directly from rich data. The data were collected through a program of twenty-two individual, semi-structured interviews designed to investigate the lived experiences of women employed in selected workforce sectors in metropolitan and regional Western Australia (Jefferson, Preston, Chapple-Fahlesson and Mitchell 2007).

The research method was specifically selected with the goal of allowing participants to discuss their experiences in the workforce and to define the issues of most importance to their particular context. The sample of women that participated in this study does not represent a statistical sample that can be considered representative of all women's experiences. Interview participants were selected to focus upon areas and industries where employees were typically reliant on rulings about minimum conditions to define their working conditions. The rationale was that the possible advantages or disadvantages of *WorkChoices* will be most evident and industrially and socially significant in minimum condition sectors. With this in mind, the study focused on women employed in the areas of aged care, child care, cleaning, hospitality and retail sectors. The sample was selected to gain insights into key social and economic connections between working conditions and other areas of women's working and non-working lives within the broader community.

The key finding from the project is that the interviews revealed little evidence that the *WorkChoices* legislation had facilitated a demonstrable improvement in employees' capacity to negotiate individually tailored working conditions. This is despite a buoyant State economy and relatively favourable labour market conditions for employees. Further, some participants' comments suggest that there are employers who have used their managerial prerogative to unilaterally change working conditions or hours of work in ways that have been detrimental to particular employees. There is little indication that, even in the context of an economic boom, the outcomes are particularly favourable for those in relatively low paid areas of the labour market.

A second key finding is that participants demonstrated a reluctance or unwillingness to engage in direct or individual negotiations to determine their employment conditions. This appears to stem from a lack of confidence in their bargaining power (which in turn has been is also affected by lack of protection for unfair dismissal) and a lack of knowledge about how to establish and pursue an appropriate claim for improved working conditions. Some participants spoke of their preference to change employment rather than work under the provisions of AWAs or to address other concerns at work. Those who were prepared to negotiate did not appear to hold a preference for individual bargaining. Rather, they were acknowledging that the practicalities of the current labour market made negotiation a necessity even if it was an approach that they would prefer to avoid.

The third finding concerns community standards such as reasonable hours, penalty rates and minimum wages. WA participants' discussions about these issues contrasted with those of other States (see Elton *et al.*, 2007). Perhaps reflecting the earlier experience of state-based industrial relations changes, few of the WA participants directly attributed their concerns about their employment and working conditions to the introduction of *WorkChoices*. Participants conveyed a wide range of stories indicating uneven bargaining relationships, growing managerial prerogative and workplace cultures where poor employment practices had been normalised. However, few regarded this as a recent phenomenon and many of the issues discussed by participants occurred before the introduction of *WorkChoices*. Some of the discussions gave

the impression that interview participants had little left to lose when *WorkChoices* was introduced. Further, WA's buoyant economy has also cushioned the effects by enabling job churning (turnover). Rather than 'rock-the-boat' and risk dismissal for seeking improvements in employment conditions, some participants simply sought a job elsewhere; a luxury afforded by the current economic climate.

Confusion and high levels of uncertainty about entitlements, nature of contract and jurisdictional coverage constituted the key fourth finding. Rather than creating a 'simpler' system, there is a lack of certainty about issues related to the negotiation of entitlements such as wages, penalty payments and working hours. Under previous regulatory frameworks, industry standards were established in awards and this approach provided highly public and accessible sources of information about wages both within and between occupational classifications. The increased practice of individual bargaining, particularly formalised AWAs with their confidentiality provisions, has curtailed the free flow of information to employees and employers. Lack of institutional support and information may be contributing to inefficient labour market outcomes and lower productivity.

It has been suggested that deregulated labour markets have been an important contributing factor to Australia's recent economic growth. The OECD has claimed that the Australian experience could provide a model for other countries. This project suggests grounds for caution. When considered against the stated aims of *WorkChoices* we found little evidence to suggest that the reforms were delivering the claimed outcomes of flexibility, family friendly working arrangements and a simpler, fairer employment regime. Participants were generally unable (or unwilling) to negotiate arrangements that enabled them to better balance their work and family responsibilities and they weren't negotiating improved wages. Poor community standards and employment practices would appear to have been normalised in feminised, low wage sectors which could be expected to contribute to inefficient work practices and constraints on productivity growth. Finally, far from simplifying the system, the reforms have added another layer of confusion and have the potential to hamper the free flow of information necessary for the working of any 'competitive' market.

The findings from this study provide complementary insights into the growing gender wage gap noted in the first study. Women are over represented in occupations and industries in which minimum conditions of employment commonly become standard conditions. On an individual basis few of these women feel they have sufficient bargaining power to negotiate desired employment conditions and their evolving institutional context provides relatively few effective remedies at a collective level.

### **Study 3: Young Women and Careers in the Minerals Industry**

WA's minerals boom poses different challenges for different labour market participants. While the previous studies focus on the uneven distribution of earnings within the WA labour market, the third study addresses a different challenge: the need for the minerals industry to attract and retain a suitable labour force in order to meet the growing demand for its product. Skills shortages are expected to continue for several years to come. Faced with labour capacity constraints there is growing need for effective employee attraction and retention strategies. There is also growing acceptance of the need to draw on a broader labour pool, including women, young people and Indigenous Australians. Currently around 88 per cent of employees in the mineral sector are males, with about 57 per cent aged between 35 and 54 years (NCVER and NILS 2005). The women employees are rather younger on average, with 25-34 year olds being over-represented relative to other industries. The long hours, lack of part-time work and fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) arrangements, along with perceptions of a masculine culture, are frequently-cited explanations for the under-representation of women in this sector, particularly mature age women.

A study, undertaken as a contract research project for the Office for Women and Minerals Council Australia (Lord, Preston and Crosbie 2007), sought to identify the career goals and expectations of young people currently enrolled in mineral sector related degree courses and their perceptions about employment in the minerals sector. The research was undertaken in two stages. The first stage involved an analysis of a 2003 survey of first year university students. The second stage comprised

a series of discussion groups with third and fourth year university students from a variety of discipline backgrounds. The findings from each stage were largely complementary, as we discuss below.

The 2003 survey was undertaken by Curtin University's Women in Social & Economic Research (WiSER) unit to investigate first year students' career goals and attitudes to gender roles. For the purposes of this study, the sample was reduced to students enrolled in minerals related courses (MRCs) and comprised 28 females and 65 males.

Female students identified good career opportunities, employment opportunities and their perceived ability to complete the course as important reasons for their choice of course. Future earnings potential also rated highly with 53 per cent of female students indicating that this was either an important or very important criteria.

Respondents were also asked to identify the importance of a series of job or occupational attributes such as the nature of the work and employment conditions. Nearly 100 per cent of the female respondents indicated that they were seeking a career with interesting work. A further 89 per cent identified exciting work as either an important or very important factor, while 82 per cent rated good career opportunities as important or very important. Future earnings potential and graduate starting salary were only described as very important by 25 and 22 per cent of respondents respectively. This may have implications for a sector relying on monetary rewards as a means of attracting labour.

When asked to picture themselves as graduates in the workforce, the majority of the young women said they expected to join a professional association (71.4 per cent), socialize after hours with their colleagues (75 per cent), work either standard or relatively long hours (over 50 per cent), earn a high income (60 per cent) and travel frequently as part of their job (89 per cent).

In most respects the female students' responses were similar to those of male students enrolled in similar courses of study. The key differences between female and male student responses related to questions about the ways they imagined balancing work and family commitments if they later had children. Responses, if realised, are likely to impact on retention and labour (skill) supply.

The average female and male students expect to be around 27 at the birth of their first child, which is around five year's post-graduation (assuming no gap years and progression from high school straight to university). Close to 100 per cent of students, male and female, anticipate returning to work after they have had children. However, important differences arise when timing (length of time out of the workforce) is considered.

Of the female students who envisage having children, around 50 per cent expect to take a significant career break of between 1 and 5 years. Less than a quarter (22.7 per cent) of the female students sees themselves returning to work before their youngest child is one year old. In contrast, 78 per cent per cent of the male students enrolled imagine being back at work before their youngest child is one.

Students were asked to imagine their employment arrangements if they became parents within a couple relationship. Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of the female students imagined themselves in a couple partnership where both parents work full-time. The most commonly imagined arrangement (by male and female students) is one where the father works full-time and the mother works part-time.

Based on the survey data it seems fair to conclude that the vast majority of these young women expect to become the primary care giver should they have children. They similarly expect to have lengthy periods of time out of the workforce. Whether these women see themselves making this decision by 'choice' or because of prevailing ideologies and social norms surrounding motherhood is something we can't determine from these data.

There is a high degree of congruence in the findings from both the student survey and the discussion group components of the study. Discussion groups were held with young women students enrolled in courses typically associated with the minerals industry (such as geology and chemical engineering) and those with a broader focus (such as science or business). Discussion group participants described a strong commitment to their career and were looking for varied, interesting, challenging, meaningful and fulfilling work. They also described their preparedness to move from one employer to another to gain such job satisfaction. Money was identified as an important factor, although good

employment conditions and flexibility were just as important for many. Thus work rosters, the degree of flexibility and the type of facilities that were offered were also considered highly important features of a potential job offer. A number of the participants considered these factors to be more important than money and indicated they would be prepared to sacrifice salary if it meant that they could have more control over other aspects of their work.

Discussion group participants enrolled in courses specifically related to the minerals industry spoke of the need for flexibility in order to maintain personal relationships. They were happy to work hard for their money but not at the expense of 'a life'. They wanted the flexibility to be able to match shifts if they were in a relationship and to be able to attend significant family and other events.

Among young women who have undertaken vacation work in the minerals sector, the experience was generally described as positive. Young women spoke about loving their work and the opportunity to work outside of the city and/or an office environment. However, they also spoke about challenges of living on site. They felt they were relatively more 'visible' and likely to be the subject of gossip and innuendo when they socialise with their work colleagues. This signals potential challenges for retaining women in employment in the minerals sector. The survey results indicate that an important aspect of working life is being able to socialise after hours with work colleagues. In contrast, the experience of a male dominated workplace may be one of isolation because there are few women colleagues and young women can find themselves ostracised if they socialise to any great extent with their male workmates. Some students noted a lack of older female role models in the sector.

Young women expected to stay in the minerals sector at least until they had children. It was at that stage that they anticipated problems due to the type of work they expected to be doing either on site or on a fly-in, fly-out basis, as well as the lack of accommodation of the needs of pregnant women by employers. Some anticipated having gained sufficient industry experience to facilitate a move to a city-based job at that stage of their working life. Others saw working independently as a consultant as a more likely option that would enable them to balance

work and family. Most expected some time out of paid employment and to work part-time for a period while their children were young. Together with perceptions that few older women work in the minerals sector, students' views about possible ways to achieve a desired balance between work and family appears to indicate a relatively short term or 'pre children' focus for their on-site industry careers.

More generally, discussion group participants identified a large number of negative and positive characteristics associated with work in the minerals sector. Some of their views arose as a result of their direct experience through vacation programs; others were the result of stories from family and friends or other sources. While some views may not accurately reflect employment in the minerals industry, they constitute perceptions that may need to be addressed if the sector wants to widen its employment pool to recruit and retain more women from both minerals related and other courses of study.

Among the perceived negative features of working in the minerals sector, students discussed the likelihood of a masculine work environment; sexual and other forms of harassment and not being able to 'be a girl'; having to prove yourself; unattractive work hours; a lack of workforce diversity; a predominantly uneducated workforce; workplaces and towns characterized by gossip or innuendo; remoteness; pressure on family and other relationships; and difficulties with meeting work and family responsibilities.

There were, however, a range of positive features that participants associated with the minerals sector, including: interesting work; high income; attractive lifestyle; quality time away from work; direct involvement with projects; opportunities to 'make a difference'; high quality experience to enhance employability; opportunities for travel; and the chance to work outside of the capital cities.

Student discussion suggests that the negative images of the minerals sector outweigh the positive images. Whilst this may affect the sector's capacity to attract and retain women it also suggests there is ample opportunity for change. Perhaps more importantly, the preparedness of the industry to both commission and seriously discuss such findings indicates that there is a potential for the development of employment

practices and policies that attempt to initiate such changes. This is an important point of contrast between the employment contexts of those entering the minerals industry and those in relatively low paid employment.

### **Areas of Commonality and Contrast**

The studies of women in low paid employment and those planning on a minerals industry career demonstrate a number of contrasts that have long been identified as important to the operation of labour markets. The female students planning on securing employment in the minerals industry are: relatively highly educated; entering an industry dominated by a small number of large organizations; part of a labour pool that is a small proportion of total costs in the industry; and entering an industry that is (currently) highly profitable and experiencing strong demand for its product. The women employed in the low paid labour market areas of aged care, child care, cleaning, hospitality and retailing are: working in sectors with a larger number of smaller employers; part of a labour pool where wages represent a significant proportion of total costs; employed in sectors that are typically less profitable or more constrained by budgets associated with restricted public funding programs. Entry to these latter sectors does not require high levels of education so there is a relatively larger pool of labour from which to recruit employees. As might be expected, these factors contribute to significantly different labour market experiences and expectations.

The students planning on a minerals industry career are likely to graduate into a labour market that is keen to buy their highly marketable set of skills and to be in a relatively strong negotiating position. Their potential employers have a high capacity to pay for their labour. As individuals they have a degree of negotiating power. However, they also have a relatively favourable institutional context. Graduate earnings surveys, professional association membership and the internal wages policies of large companies provide reference points for both potential employees and employers to compare salary and employment packages. Their institutional context provides important sources of information for the operation of the graduate labour market. The challenges for female

students, and for those wishing to retain their skills, are likely to arise later in their life course and to involve issues around the balancing of paid work and household responsibilities. Current expectations appear to include a continuation of existing gender roles with respect to the organization of work. However, a failure to address women's working life requirements may have significant economic consequences for both sides of the labour market - the supply of women employees prepared to work in the minerals industry and the capacity for minerals sector employers to meet their demand for labour. Pressure from both the supply and demand sides of the labour market may provide sufficient impetus for the development of innovative and flexible working arrangements that meet the needs of both parties. The commissioning of research by the Minerals Council of Australia and other organizations involved in the minerals sector is one indication of possible change in this direction.

The expectations of young women who are considering careers in the minerals industry pose a different set of issues from those discussed in the study about low paid work. Like the minerals sector students, women in low paid sectors are also working within the context of a relatively tight labour market. However, they face a significantly different institutional context. They are unfamiliar with the process of negotiating an employment contract and express considerable uncertainty about how and where to obtain information about relevant employment standards. Interview participants expressed a preparedness to rely on employers to define appropriate employment standards and to adjust wage rates over time. However, participants' experiences suggest that some employers are also relatively uninformed about appropriate employment standards. Further, in a context where labour costs are a significant proportion of total costs, employers risk reduced viability if they pay higher wages than a competitor. Without an acknowledged community standard or mandated award minimum, there is an incentive for employers to avoid any risk of paying wages that are above those of a competitor. In addition, where cash payment of wages is relatively common, such as in the hospitality sector, timely and reliable information about an industry's wage practices may be difficult to obtain.

In contrast to the minerals sector there is little sign that employers in feminised industry sectors are undertaking coordinated research at an industry level to address potential labour shortages or examine employees' expectations from employment. The experience of interview participants is one of unilateral approaches to defining employment conditions by employers, and by implication, an extension of a managerial prerogative.

The different labour market context of the two groups of women demonstrates contrasting effects of industrial relations institutions and regulations on different labour market sectors. For those in relatively low paid sectors, industrial tribunals provide an important source of information about industry standards and minimum employment conditions that is likely to have direct relevance to their employment. The minerals industry students with skills that are in high demand appear less likely to be affected by changes in the methods for determining minimum levels of pay and conditions. Potential employers in the minerals industry are also in a position to coordinate their approach to information gathering and to address potential labour shortages through industry level programs of research that will establish common ground for their future human resources policies.

The contrast between the two labour market sectors provides insights into some of the causal mechanisms behind the widening gender wage gap identified in the first section of this article. Women's over representation in the minimum conditions sector of the labour market results in a heavy reliance on terms and conditions of employment that are defined by institutions such as industrial tribunals and, now, the Australian Fair Pay Commission. Reductions in minimum conditions can lead to reductions in industry standards, particularly in feminised industries. This has a gendered impact because of women's employment patterns.

In the absence of third party regulation and with declining union representation, employers generally retain the authority to set the agenda and to address the challenges of tight labour markets. The minerals sector study illustrates one possible scenario: proactive research and policy development to address skill shortages that potentially limit industry profitability or growth. However, not all industries have the same

concentrated structure or profitability of the minerals industry. Further, the development and implementation of appropriate policies to address labour market concerns can be difficult and long term. As indicated by the study of low paid workers, it seems likely that some employers in other industry sectors will continue to adopt a more fragmented and short term approach, relying on unilateral decisions that can have adverse effects on employees' earnings and employment conditions.

## Conclusions

The long boom in Western Australia has posed a range of challenges and opportunities for both employers and employees. Moreover, it is clear that the rewards from the boom are unevenly distributed. At an aggregate level, WA's labour market shows increasing gender inequity. This has a number of linked causes, including significant shifts in the labour markets' institutional arrangements. Women in low paid sectors appear to be particularly vulnerable to missing out on the potential advantages of economic growth, and those employed on Australian Workplace Agreements are faring relatively poorly. Those with little bargaining power depend on labour market institutions such as industrial tribunals and the Australian Fair Pay Commission playing an important role in defining appropriate standards of employment and redressing labour market imbalances. In contrast, students hoping to pursue a career in the minerals industry appear to be in a relatively favourable negotiating position and their potential employers appear to have significant internal institutional processes relevant to establishing favourable wages policies and employment standards. Challenges for future women employees in this sector may arise if they attempt to combine work and family commitments or if there are significant changes in the industry's profitability or structure.

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