Submission to the Australian Fair Pay Commission’s Wage Review  
March 2008

Overview
This submission originally came from a thesis submitted in 2007 as part of my undergraduate degree. The topic is a critical examination of the relationship between Australian wage fixation and women workers. One of the ways women’s participation in Australia’s labour market is recognised and valued is through minimum wage decisions. This thesis is an exploration of just how these wage decisions do recognise women workers. In order to narrow this broad topic, this thesis chose to look at two very important wage decisions in Australia, both signifying the introduction of industrial relations changes in Australia at different times in our history.

The first is the well-known Harvester Judgement, which was created in 1907 by Justice Henry Bourne Higgins. This decision determined what a ‘fair and reasonable’ wage was for a male breadwinner. It argues that this decision ignored the role and participation of women in Australia’s labour market in 1907. The second decision explored is the 2006 inaugural decision of the Australian Fair Pay Commission – a new body established at a period of Australia entering industrial relations change. It is argued this decision also failed to adequately recognise the working status of women. Through these two decisions – both historically significant – this thesis argued that, despite the century difference between each, no change has been made in the attitude of wage fixing bodies toward women workers.

Key Recommendations
Out of the research undertaken as part of this thesis, there are a number of key recommendation which emerged. These recommendations, it is urged, should form part of the Australian Fair Pay Commission’s considerations when setting the minimum wage, both in 2008 and in the future. The first recommendation is the need for the Commission to undertake solid research on the position and vulnerability of women in Australia’s labour market. It is suggested that the questions, which were posed for this research project, be used as a base by the Commission to help form a picture of this place for women. This in turn will allow the Commission to understand the challenges and barriers facing many women in Australia’s labour market and why and how minimum wage setting impacts women more so than other minimum wage earners. From this, other key questions needing to be answered will emerge. In order to conduct this research, it is vital that comprehensive qualitative research is undertaken, such as through interviews and case studies of the women themselves.

The second key recommendation is the need for both the Commission and the Federal Government to work together to raise the profile of wage inequity in the Australian labour market and create ways to change it. This specifically refers to the need to place in the legislation governing the workplace a direct reference to the powers of wage setting bodies to directly address wage inequity (between men and women in particular) in their decisions. Given the current federal government is on track to making changes to the existing legislation, this submissions recommends that the Commission work together now with the government to ensure this change is secured.