

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS (EQUAL REMUNERATION) AMENDMENT BILL 2018

Introduction and First Reading

Bill introduced, on motion by **Hon Alison Xamon**, and read a first time.

Second Reading

HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan) [10.18 am]: I move —

That the bill be now read a second time.

The Industrial Relations (Equal Remuneration) Amendment Bill 2018 seeks to amend the Industrial Relations Act 1979 to allow for the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission to hear pay equity cases and make enforceable equal remuneration orders so that employees to whom the order will apply are able to receive equal remuneration for work of equal or comparable value. The bill proposes the inclusion of provisions similar to those provided to employees covered under the federal industrial relations system, which allows for such cases to be heard. This will ensure that workers covered under the Western Australian system, rather than the federal system, have access to a mechanism similar to that available to their counterparts under federal jurisdiction.

A strong legislative basis for pay equity is essential to reducing Australia's gender pay gap and to supporting female workforce participation, and Western Australia has, very slowly, been making progress towards this. Formal recognition of the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value was introduced into the Industrial Relations Act 1979 in 2002, when amendments inserted a new principle object into the act "to promote equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value."

In 2006 the Labour Relations Legislation Amendment Act 2006 introduced section 50A, which enabled the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission to determine minimum wages while having regard to a new set of specified criteria, including that wage orders "provide equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal or comparable value". However, the current legislative provisions remain inadequate. For example, although a greater proportion of women than men are paid the minimum wage and it is vitally important that consideration be given to equal remuneration when setting the minimum wage, the capacity for this mechanism to be used to address the issue of the gender pay gap more broadly is obviously limited. The authority of the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission to hear pay equity cases also remains in question, which is the principal reason I am introducing this bill. The Industrial Relations (Equal Remuneration) Amendment Bill 2018 makes clear the authority of the commission to hear such cases.

The bill allows for a pay equity matter to be referred to the commission by an employer with a sufficient interest, a relevant organisation or association, the minister, an employee, or the Commissioner for Equal Opportunity. The broad term "remuneration" is used in the bill to provide the commission with the capacity to ensure there is equity not only with regard to rates of pay, but also across the total remuneration package of an employee, including conditions of employment. This bill has been drafted to allow implementation of equal remuneration orders to be undertaken either immediately or progressively, as provided in the order, similar to the provision provided in the federal legislation. This recognised that some employers and funding bodies may need to make quite significant changes to ensure pay equity and that these may take time to implement. The bill also provides that an equal remuneration order cannot allow for a reduction in an employee's rate of remuneration. Although the bill allows pay equity cases to be run, it does not anticipate the outcome. In making an equal remuneration order the commission must be satisfied that there is not already equal remuneration. If there is no case on which to base a claim that an employee is not receiving equal pay for work of equal or comparable value, I would expect that the case would not be successful. The bill provides a mechanism to allow for cases of this type to be heard in this jurisdiction.

I would like to provide a bit of background for the need for this bill. At 22.8 per cent, WA has the largest gender pay gap in Australia. For every dollar earned by a man in WA, a woman will earn 77c. For each week of full-time ordinary work a woman will receive \$373.50 less than a man. These are appalling statistics. Of great concern to me is that, despite recognising the issue for decades, successive governments have failed to make any real inroads into reducing WA's gender pay gap. One of the reasons for the continuing failure to address the state's gender pay gap is a persistent and fundamental lack of awareness and understanding about the existence and nature of the gap. There is a common misconception that a significant amount of responsibility for the gap lies in the characteristics of our resources sector. Our appalling gender pay gap cannot be solely explained away by WA's resources sector and the relatively small number of women employed in that sector. The mining industry accounts for only around six per cent of employment in WA, so the mining industry is only a small part of the story. Pay inequity is present at all skill and income levels across industries. That being said, some sectors have higher gender pay gaps than the average, such as the finance and retail sectors. This, again, is only a small part of the problem. Reasons for the gender pay gap are complex and multifaceted and include unsupportive working arrangements and overrepresentation of women in casual and non-career, part-time employment. A significant portion of the gap is

caused not by pay differentials within industries, but by the highly segregated nature of Western Australia's workforce, and the fact that women and men tend to work in different industries.

Perhaps the most significant cause of the persistent lack of pay equity is the disparity that occurs between traditionally male or traditionally female jobs, and the devaluing of the work undertaken by women. This is clearly evident in the characteristics of our social and community services sector. The sector employs around 83 per cent women and 17 per cent men. There is a raft of reasons why workers in the community sector earn so much less than others, even when their jobs require similar levels of expertise or training as workers in the public sector or other fields. But fundamentally it is about the cultural devaluation and poor industrial protection of work traditionally viewed as being "women's work".

Women are in effect being penalised for caring for the most disadvantaged within our community; we need to remove this penalty. Recognition of the fact that employees in the social and community services sector have for too long been undervalued and underpaid was recently provided by the landmark finding by Fair Work Australia that for employees in this sector, "there is not equal remuneration for men and women workers for equal or comparable value by comparison with workers in state and local government employment." Fair Work Australia's equal remuneration order opened the door at the federal level for real movement on entrenched gender inequity in the social and community services sector; however, of great concern is that a significant number of workers within the community sector in WA are covered by the state industrial relations system. WA has the highest state industrial relations system coverage of all Australian states and territories. Significant gender pay gaps have also been identified in other sectors that potentially come under state industrial relations jurisdiction, including within the public sector. The Industrial Relations (Equal Remuneration) Amendment Bill 2018 will allow employees in these sectors to also seek remedy.

Adequately addressing the issue of pay equity is important not only because as a civilised society we have a duty to ensure justice and equity for women, but also because there is a compelling economic argument that equal pay for women provides a strong incentive for more women to enter the workforce and thus boost the labour force. Increased female workforce participation has a positive impact on skill shortages and increases productivity. A research report by Goldman Sachs JBVere Investment Research argued that proactive policies aimed at increasing female participation in the workforce will significantly boost Australia's economic growth, and help to solve the looming fiscal burden of an ageing population. Pay equity is something we can no longer marginalise.

The flow-on effects of the persistent gender pay gap are grim. The decision in families as to who undertakes care is influenced by pay equity, limiting the choices and opportunities for both men and women. This occurs regardless of skill levels, preferences or the needs of those requiring care. The effects also continue on to the experiences of women in their post-employment lives. Too many women are retiring with inadequate superannuation and other retirement savings, and are forced to rely on pensions because of the great disparity in earnings between men and women. Research commissioned by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation in 2016 showed that women retire with around one-third of the superannuation that men accrue.

We need to remove the persistent barriers within our industrial relations system that prevent us addressing the issues of pay equity on a state level. Western Australia has the largest gender pay gap of any state or territory. We have a moral responsibility to ensure that those workers covered under the state industrial relations system are not being paid lower wages because of longstanding undervaluing of work traditionally viewed as "women's work". We should be leading the other states in our efforts to address the issue because we are currently running last and have the most work to do.

Any equity protection for Australian working women is a patchwork of commonwealth, state and territory laws and policy instruments in both the industrial relations and anti-discrimination arenas. I believe it is important within the extremely complicated overlap of industrial systems that all Western Australian workers are afforded the same level of protection in regard to pay equity.

Western Australian women constitute a higher proportion of casual workers, and are more likely to be working under minimum employment conditions and be engaged in low-paid occupations and industries. They are under-represented in senior and decision-making roles across business, government and the community. Western Australian women continue to experience workplace discrimination on the basis of sex, pregnancy, potential pregnancy and family responsibilities. Women should not be paid less than men for doing work of similar value, and our laws should not allow the systemic undervaluing of women's work. We need to amend the Industrial Relations Act 1979 so that there is a remedy when this occurs. I urge members to demonstrate their commitment to overcoming the gender wage inequalities that exist in Western Australia by supporting the Industrial Relations (Equal Remuneration) Amendment Bill 2018.

Pursuant to standing order 126(1), I advise that this bill is not a uniform legislation bill. It does not ratify or give effect to an intergovernmental or multilateral agreement to which the government of the state is a party. Nor does this bill, by reason of its subject matter, introduce a uniform scheme or uniform laws throughout the commonwealth.

I commend the bill to the house and table an explanatory memorandum.

[See paper 1201.]

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.