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Business records relating to women*

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Introduction

The business records held by the Archives of Business and Labour contain only a narrow range of information explicitly relating to women.

There are only a few scattered references to women in 19th century business records. An example of such a reference is an account by the Australian Agricultural Company's Commissioner, Sir Edward Parry, to the London Directors on 22 April 1830 on the refusal of the wives of indentured servants to carry out washing duties at the company's hospital at Carrington, and his actions to enforce compliance (78/1/19 despatch 16). Further details of this incident are contained in Parry's diary. The Archives of Business and Labour holds a microfilm copy (M32) while the original is held by the Mitchell Library.

The overwhelming predominance of men in managerial positions is confirmed by the absence of references to women holding such positions in the relevant records of businesses. Moreover, major series such as directors' minutes and administrative correspondence contain only occasional references to policies on the terms and conditions of employment of women.

The records

Records from companies

Information relating to women is usually contained in the wage and salary records of companies. Three examples of such records are described below.

In the archives of the wholesale merchants Paterson Laing and Bruce there are eight volumes of wage and salary books for the years 1924-28, 1932-42, and 1946-60 (N29/104-111). An investigation of these volumes reveals the numbers of women employed and wages earned, from which their positions in the hierarchy can be assessed.

* Since this article was written in 1986, significant additions have been made to most of the collections mentioned. Detailed finding aids of these additions are available at the Archives.

Company records which detail salaries and wages often give more information than just money received. In the records of the Melbourne Head Office of the pastoral company Goldsbrough Mort, there are five volumes titled 'Registers of Officers', dating from 1874 to 1944 (2A/1). They give the full name of the employee, address, department where employed, date of entering service, position held, salary, salary increases and reasons for leaving. A study of these records suggests that there was a direct correlation between the introduction of machines in the office environment and the employment of women.

Wages records can also provide evidence of the employment of Aboriginal women in the pastoral industry. The records of two Northern Territory pastoral properties of Bovril Australian Estates – Carlton Hill and Laguna – include wage statements covering the period 1950 to 1952 (42/12). These records give names, work performed, wage rates and money earned.

Only one example was found of women managing businesses, and that was in the records of the Hotels Division of Tooth & Co. Ltd, which show there was a large number of female licensees. Two series in particular are of value in tracing these women - the hotel cards and the hotel file series (ca. 1920-79). The hotel cards present information on the ownership, leases, licensees and performance of each hotel (Z157). The hotel files are divided into city and country properties, and mainly comprise correspondence and reports on the property and its management.

Records from women's organisations

While the information in business records is generally confined to employment details, the records held for three women's organisations reflect a wide range of issues and concerns. These organisations are the Union of Australian Women, the Australian Federation of University Women** and the Business and Professional Women's Club of Canberra.

The Union of Australian Women was formed in August 1950 with the aims of winning and defending women's rights, defending the rights of all children to life, happiness and education, and safeguarding peace. It is not a trade union but attempts to work closely with these bodies. The main series of records held for this organisation are subject files covering the 1960s and 1970s.

The records of the Australian Federation of University Women date from its formation in 1922. It is a confederation of a number of associations of university women in Australia, and aims to promote contact between university women both nationally and internationally, to further the development of education, and to encourage the participation of women graduates in all aspects of public life. The records held include Federation council minutes 1922-82 and subject files for the period 1922-85.

International contact is maintained through the Federation's affiliation with the International Federation of University Women, and records held contain conference and council minutes of the International Federation of University Women and subject files covering the work of this body ca.1927-1980.

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This collection was transferred to the National Library of Australia in December 2000. Information on the collection can be obtained from the Manuscript Section, National Library of Australia, Parkes Place, Canberra. Ph.6262 1259.

The Business and Professional Women's Club of Canberra is a branch of a similarly named national body. The objects include the promotion of "...the interests of business and professional women and to awaken and encourage a realisation of responsibilities in their country and consequently world affairs". They are also concerned about standards of education and training for women and work to remove all discrimination towards women in the work force. Records include minutes of annual general meetings 1954-75, minutes of general and executive meetings 1968-82, and subject files 1968-81.

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