

The Working Women's Centre SA acknowledges Kurna people as the Traditional Owners and continuing custodians of the Adelaide Plains and Greater Adelaide Region, the land upon which we predominately carry out our work.

We pay our respects to Kurna Elders past and present, and to the Kurna Nation, recognising their spiritual relationship to this Country and that their sovereignty was never ceded. We extend these respects to the Traditional Owners of the 40+ Aboriginal Nations of South Australia and to all First Peoples of Australia.

Introduction

Our submission will focus on the issue of historical stolen wages, with a particular focus on the stolen wages of Aboriginal women who were domestic servants in South Australia which we consider to still be unfinished business.

Up until the mid to late twentieth century, it was common for governments, churches and other employers to steal wages from Aboriginal workers. Aboriginal women and girls, specifically, often worked in domestic servitude, a form of slavery justified by racist attitudes and enforced through oppressive systems.

Forced and unpaid labour was intertwined with systemic removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island children from their families (**Bringing Them Home Report 1997**), including the targeted removal of young Aboriginal girls from their families by the state, who were then made to work as domestic servants. They were forced to work for private white families, pastoral stations, hospitals, and other employers. Domestic servants were also subjected to unnumerable other instances of racist violence, including physical and sexual abuse.

There were many ways in which Aboriginal workers had their wages stolen from them:

- Being paid very little.
- Being paid nothing at all.
- Being paid in rations or having living expenses withdrawn from wages.
- Having wages withheld by the state in trust accounts.

The very practice of this wage theft was racist; it was a system of theft only applied to Aboriginal people.

In 2006, there was a Senate Inquiry into Stolen Wages. The Inquiry's report, *Unfinished Business*, made a number of urgent recommendations. This year is the 20th anniversary of this report, and many of its recommendations remain ignored.

Addressing the historical stolen wages of Aboriginal workers is an important part of any efforts towards truth-telling, justice, and reconciliation in Australia, without which combatting racism, hatred and violence directed at First Nations people, is not possible.

About us

The **Working Women's Centre SA** (WWC SA) is a non-government organisation and Community Legal Centre that provides free and confidential advice, support and representation to vulnerable workers residing in South Australia about their rights at work. We also provide tailored training programs to educate workers, employers, organisations and community groups on gender-based issues at work. We advocate for systemic change for workers through campaigns, education, policy development and community events.

The WWC SA has been operating since 1979 and has a strong legacy of contributing to greater equality for workers.

Our work has three streams:

- Legal: Free legal advice and representation for working women who are low paid workers, vulnerable workers or women experiencing workplace issues including discrimination and sexual harassment.
- Advocacy: Identifying trends or issues, and advocating for systemic change through policy, communication, campaigns and movements.
- Education and workplace training: Free and fee-for-service training to employers and employees in high-risk industries and workplaces, small business and the public sector.

All our work is interconnected and informed by the experiences of our clients. When we notice a pattern in our legal work, we will use our advocacy and education arms to address these issues at a systemic level.

We apply a gendered and feminist lens to all our work and aim for the WWC SA to be a safe and empowering place for women to gain support around issues such as workplace sexual harassment and assault. We are connected to grassroots movements and work with communities who are experiencing issues such as wage theft and racism to push back against exploitation.

The WWC SA remains resolute in our commitment to standing in solidarity with Aboriginal people. We continue to call on Australian governments to negotiate treaties with Aboriginal people and urge all sectors of society to engage in truth-telling about our history.

Background and about this submission

In recent years, WWC SA has committed to raising awareness and action around the under-recognised issue of stolen wages in South Australia, including the experience of Aboriginal women as domestic servants. The State's racially discriminatory practices in regard to Aboriginal workers persisted well into the 1970s. Many Aboriginal workers were never paid, were paid very little, or had their wages withheld, often in domestic or pastoral roles.

Our work on this issue is a necessary step on our own reconciliation journey as an organisation born out of feminist and workers movements. The labour movement in Australia has frequently privileged the interests of white men throughout its history, as has scholarship

on this union history. Similarly, feminist movements have historically neglected the stories and activism of Aboriginal women.

For these reasons, the [WWC SA Reconciliation Action Plan](#) acknowledges that

“Feminist movements and workers’ rights movements have both benefitted from Aboriginal people’s knowledge and guidance, and have also let Aboriginal people down, across the history of the colony of Australia, which was built on extraction and the unpaid and underpaid exploitation of First Nations working people, including women”.

“The Working Women’s Centre SA envisions the achievement of reconciliation through a process of truth-telling, treaty-making, justice and reparation with First Peoples. We understand that reconciliation will not be possible without guaranteeing self-determination and universal human rights for First Peoples, and a national respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their rights and their caring for Country and Culture.”

Our Centre has been working with researchers, scholars, activists and legal colleagues to understand this issue and assist Aboriginal women in accessing their employment records from the state archives, a process often hindered by bureaucratic obstacles. The decolonisation of these records is essential for truth-telling and reconciliation.

Between 2022 and 2024 the WWC SA have been approached by a number of Aboriginal women seeking to access legal support around their experiences of Historical Stolen Wages in South Australia, through their work with private and government employers in the 1960s.

We committed to researching what was possible for these women and their families, applying for their archived records from [State Records South Australia](#), and seeking additional pro-bono legal advice where possible.

Alongside this process with individual clients, we have been learning from and collaborating with Dr Natalie Harkin, Narungga, a Research Fellow in Critical Indigenous Studies at Flinders University. Through her extensive research funded by the Australia Research Council, which began with her own family archives, Dr Harkin created a powerful documentation of domestic servitude and stolen wages in South Australia, [Apron-Sorrow / Sovereign Tea](#) (2025).

As described by publisher Wakefield Press, this extraordinary book

“evokes an embodied reckoning with Aboriginal women's domestic labour and servitude drawing from oral history and the South Australian State's official record. It explores the complexity of Aboriginal women's experiences and survival strategies, and intergenerational stories that span loss, love, sorrow, solidarity, resistance, and refusal.”

Apron-Sorrow / Sovereign-Tea was longlisted for the [2026 Stella Prize](#). Judges described it as

“a powerful reckoning with the state archives that illuminates and vividly remembers the harrowing experiences of Aboriginal women and girls in domestic servitude in South

Australia. The intergenerational effects on families and communities are deeply conveyed, and Harkin’s woven truth-telling is a potent response to whitewashed narratives and brutal systems of control and capture. No longer invisible or ignored, the labour histories of Aboriginal women are important in the greater context of a nation still denying its past.”

Under the leadership and collaboration of Dr Harkin, we have sought to support research, advocacy and community conversations on how South Australia could reckon with its history of Stolen Wages. This reckoning must include ensuring Aboriginal people in South Australia have trauma-informed and culturally safe access to their records held by the State; this may also be referred to as Archival Justice.

The WWC SA has begun co-hosting, with Dr Harkin, a series of private roundtable conversations that have brought together First Nations leaders, advocates, scholars and legal experts to pursue truth-telling and justice.

In this submission to the *Inquiry into racism, hate and violence directed at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, we share some key issues, thinking and recommendations in the areas of Historical Stolen Wages and Archival Justice, particular to South Australia however relevant to the whole Commonwealth of Australia.

As such our submission concerns four items from the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry. These are:

- ***The nature, prevalence and impact of racism, hate and violence towards First Nations people, including trends over time.***
- ***Initiatives that are effective in combating racism targeted at First Nations people and reduce individual and collective harm.***
- ***The effectiveness of avenues for reporting and responding to racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the consistency, timeliness and appropriateness of outcomes across jurisdictions and institutions.***
- ***Other matters related to racism, hatred and violence directed at First Nations people.***

Historical stolen wages

Australian history is marked by indentured labour and racist wage theft – income that was systematically stolen from First Nations people, as described in our introduction.

Aboriginal workers were subjected to indentured labour practices and wage theft across Australia from the 1800s right up to the late twentieth century.

These stolen wages and oppressive labour conditions have contributed greatly to **intergenerational trauma and the significant wealth gap** between First Nations people and other Australians that remains today.

Employers who engaged in these racist, oppressive labour practices did so because it was profitable; governments, churches and private employers profited from this exploitation across all tiers of society.

Exploitation of Aboriginal workers was fundamentally tied to other coercive systems applied only to Aboriginal people, including:

- extreme surveillance during the Protectorate Era,
- the forced removal of children,
- the full control held by government welfare officers and protection boards over all aspects of life,
- and the use of government trust accounts, pooling income including Commonwealth benefits.

The exploitation of Aboriginal workers and theft of their wages was also highly gendered. For Aboriginal women and girls, this meant being systemically indentured into domestic servitude in white families, private homes, and institutions. Girls were sent to specific schools to be trained as domestic servants, such as the Salvation Army Girls' Home in Fullarton, South Australia.

These practices were rife in South Australia and are known through research, inquiries and community knowledge. Most Aboriginal families in South Australia carry stories of servitude and wage control.

While this history is unknown by many Australians, it has been widely documented. Perhaps a reason why the truth of this history remains so 'unknown' (or ignored or denied) by non-Indigenous Australians is because it means confronting this country's use of slavery.

A definitive text on the Aboriginal labour experiences and slavery in Australia is *Aboriginal Workers* (1995) edited by Ann McGrath, Kay Saunders and Jackie Huggins.

In an interview about the 2020 special reissue of the book, the editors say,

“Recent research projects have produced data bases that reveal far more information about the history of slavery, its global repercussions, its implication on global capitalism, and insights into the consequences, including trans-generational trauma. This collection enables us to appreciate those new findings about slavery, for these historical revelations remain deeply informative.

As we wrote in our original introduction in 1995: “This collection has a particular emphasis on slavery. Its reappearance in questions relating to Australian Aboriginal labour reveals its continuing importance to an analysis of labour structures, racism and Imperialism. Beyond this, the slavery theme is also a deep-seated cultural motif in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal popular memory. In contemporary Aboriginal understandings, slavery is the ultimate humiliation, typifying a sense of defeat in the face of the great oppressions of colonialism.”

Archival justice

All jurisdictions in Australia hold archives kept by the state and church that document in detail this history of oppression and control. Archives are held by police, education, health institutions, museums, libraries, and mission collections.

In South Australia, access to government State Aboriginal Records has been curtailed since 2004, when a blanket ban was put on record series *GRG 52/1: the correspondence of the Aborigines Department 1868-1962* by then Labor Attorney General, Michael Atkinson, which has been maintained ever since. These records were made subject to legal professional privilege with an additional vetting process and can only be released with approval by the Crown, requiring the permission of the Attorney General.

It is understood amongst Aboriginal community members and scholars that this ban was a response to the successful and high-profile lawsuit by the late Ngarrindjeri man Bruce Trevorow for pain and suffering resulting from his removal from his parents as a baby by the state.

Historian and author of *The Last Protector* (2009), Cameron Raynes, discussed this in an article ***Secret History (Inside Story, 2009)***,

“It was official: Michael Atkinson had delivered on his promise and had me effectively banned from accessing GRG 52/1.

I was informed by an officer at the department that every time I wanted to look at anything from GRG 52/1 it would have to be retrieved from State Records – staff resources permitting – and examined for the presence of material subject to legal professional privilege. That officer would then report back to the CEO of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation, who would inform the Crown Solicitor’s Office, who would then inform the attorney-general. A convoluted process of approval or disapproval would commence. I requested a clear outline of this new access regime, in writing. I am still waiting.

This new regime was then extended to all members of the South Australian public. It is still in place in February 2009.

Clearly, the South Australian government is worried about the possibility of claims for compensation by members of the stolen generations following the landmark Trevorow test case. In 2007, in South Australia’s Supreme Court, Justice Thomas Gray found that Bruce Trevorow had been illegally removed from his parents in 1957. He also found that the effect it had on his life was profound. Bruce died in June 2008, just months after he was awarded \$525,000 for injuries, losses and false imprisonment.

In February 2008, the government decided to appeal certain points of law in the case, so as to “clarify the law.” The appeal is pending. Meanwhile, it is no longer possible for any historian, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, to embark on a process of discovery using the correspondence files of the Aborigines Department. This goes directly against the findings of the Bringing Them Home inquiry in the mid-1990s, several of which related to

the importance of allowing Aboriginal people and others access to government archives.”

After twenty years, there have been some recent positive changes to accessing State Aboriginal Records, working toward a trauma-informed approach to access, and streamlining access and transparency. The Attorney General is yet to announce any formal changes. There will still be restrictions on access, and the records will still be subject to legal professional privilege.

The WWC SA has found securing the records of our clients a long and sometimes unsuccessful process, one that we are still undertaking.

Governments must open South Australian State Records series GRG 52/1, and all records kept by Australian Commonwealth and State Governments about First Nations people, with processes to ensure Aboriginal families can better access their archives.

In addition to removing current restrictions on access to archives, government records systems must be adequately resourced to provide these archives to Aboriginal people in a way that is trauma-informed and culturally safe.

Access to archives is not simply a stepping stone to justice; it is a human right and an inherent act of dignity by itself.

Stolen Wages in SA: Unfinished Business – 20 years later

Twenty years ago, in 2006, a Federal Senate Inquiry was held on the matter of Indigenous Stolen Wages.

Its final report, ***Unfinished Business***, noted its disappointment that the South Australian Government did not participate in the national inquiry. It noted ***that “while extensive archival records do exist in relation to the management of Indigenous monies in South Australia, there are obstacles to accessing that information”.***

The Senate Report stated that ***“unless state governments took a more proactive approach, there is a risk that past injustices will be compounded with further inaction”.***

It recommends that Commonwealth and State Governments facilitate unhindered access to archives, reiterating the need for research into stolen wages as a matter of urgency.

The report’s Recommendation 5, stated that the South Australian government, among other states, needs to:

- ***“Urgently consult with Indigenous people in relation to their stolen wages.***
- ***Conduct preliminary targeted and comprehensive research of its archival material.***
- ***Where there is evidence to the withholding, underpayment or non-payment of Indigenous wages and welfare entitlements, then establish a compensation scheme.”***

These recommendations have not been acted upon by any South Australian Government.

Class actions

In some states and territories, Aboriginal people have taken class actions to sue governments for their historical wage theft and the state's role in facilitating wage theft by other bodies through trusts and welfare funds.

In these cases, it was established that there was a practice of employers paying the government the wages of Aboriginal workers and the government holding those wages 'in trust' for Aboriginal people. In some states of Australia, laws existed at the time that allowed state governments to withhold wages earned by Aboriginal people. In successful stolen wages litigation, applicants have been able to prove the government's failure to pay the wages to the Aboriginal people was unlawful.

These litigation proceedings in QLD, WA and the NT, have resulted in multi-million-dollar settlements, that distribute payments of between \$10,000 and \$16,500 to affected Aboriginal people and families.

However, the experience of these class actions for the complainants has been difficult. As reported by **Four Corners in 2025**, Aboriginal people have found the process exploitative, lengthy, confusing and ***"little more than a money-making exercise for others"*** as stated by Northern Territory Chief Justice Debra Mortimer. Law firms and litigation funds have been highly criticized for treatment of applicants and class members, and for taking excessive payments from these important settlements. Accounting firms who have won tenders to administer payment schemes have also been criticized.

In November 2025, **Deloitte won a 77% increase to its costs to administer Stolen wages payments in the Northern Territory**. Chief Justice Mortimer criticized Deloitte for failing to ensure they were guided ***"by a real understanding of the disadvantages facing this cohort and the severe communications challenges"***. For instance, evidence in the Federal Court showed Deloitte failed to take into account the challenges to internet access and to identification documents experienced by Aboriginal people in remote NT.

There has been no reparations or compensation scheme in South Australia for stolen wages, and the lockdown of archival evidence has complicated and stalled the State's response. We have heard reports of members of Aboriginal families in Central Australia being deemed eligible or not eligible for compensation depending on which side of the NT/ SA border they reside. Justice is long overdue for Aboriginal workers in South Australia who have had their wages stolen.

The experience of the arduous nature of class actions in other States and Territories, especially for Elders, should encourage the South Australia government to choose to address the history of stolen wages in a different and more trauma-informed way. This should also be considered by other states.

What could justice begin to look like?

Global experiences of reckoning with colonialism, racism and slavery, show us the importance of truth-telling and acknowledgement, accountability and redress.

Governments must acknowledge the state's leading role in these systems of racism. Other institutions must also acknowledge their complicity. Redress can encompass a range of actions, including economic and non-economic justice.

Stolen Wages justice can include:

- Archival justice; unhindered access to personal and family archives held by the State.
- Public processes of truth-telling about the history of stolen wages.
- Genuine acknowledgment and apologies from complicit institutions.
- Reparations; monetary compensation or contributions from governments, corporations and other institutions who have profited from the systems of historical stolen wages (such as family trusts created by pastoralists).

Archival justice is an essential first step.

The Tandanya Declaration was adopted internationally by the International Council on Archives (ICA) on Kauria Country, Adelaide, in October 2019. The Declaration called on the jurisdictional archives of the world to acknowledge and adopt the themes and commitments of the Declaration for immediate action.

These commitments are:

- Knowledge authorities: Public archive systems must accept and embrace Indigenous ontologies in order to decolonise.
- Property and ownership: Acceptance of Indigenous ownership of traditional knowledge, cultural expression, knowledge, and intellectual property.
- Recognition and identity: Dignified and respectful recognition in archival representational systems.
- Research and access: Rights to access, control, Indigenous data sovereignty, right of reply and redress.
- Self-determination: Applying the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) to public archives – that Indigenous people's access, decolonising and safeguarding of public "houses of memory" is a human right.

Cultural institutions globally have been encouraged to adopt the key themes and principles of The Tandanya Declaration, however the activation by record holders are varied, including in South Australia. **State Records SA includes a response document and actions on its website** which includes a commitment to ***"A review of a restricted series in the State archive collection commenced by State Records staff with an aim to improve access."***

To progress both archival justice and stolen wages redress, the South Australian Government needs to invest in the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector, and work in partnership with the Aboriginal community to:

- Implement the recommendations from the 2006 Senate Inquiry's final report, *Unfinished Business*.

- Implement archival justice and provide Aboriginal people complete access to their family archives.
- Engage in public truth-telling processes and community education around the South Australian experience of historical stolen wages.
- Voluntarily and in the spirit of reconciliation and truth-telling, commit to forming a redress scheme in consultation with people and families who experienced indentured labour and historical stolen wages in South Australia.

Conclusion and Inquiry Recommendations

Racism, hate and violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people today cannot be extracted from the systemic violence and racism of the history of the colony. To grapple with racism we must tackle intergenerational, systemic racism and its impacts.

Regarding the following Terms of Reference,

- The nature, prevalence and impact of racism, hate and violence towards First Nations people, including trends over time;
- Other matters related to racism, hatred and violence directed at First Nations people.

We recommend that this Inquiry:

1. Acknowledge and report on the role of Historical Stolen Wages in the intergenerational trauma, wealth and health gaps, and racism, experienced by First Nations people.
2. Review the outstanding recommendations from the 2006 Senate Inquiry *Unfinished Business* and recommend that Federal and State Governments take urgent action as relevant, including the South Australian Government.

Regarding the following Terms of Reference,

- Initiatives that are effective in combating racism targeted at First Nations people and reduce individual and collective harm;
- The effectiveness of avenues for reporting and responding to racism against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including the consistency, timeliness and appropriateness of outcomes across jurisdictions and institutions.

We recommend that this Inquiry:

1. Ask the Federal Government to review the implementation of the Tandanya Declaration in Commonwealth-funded agencies.
2. Where public records are restricted for access by Aboriginal people, such as in South Australia, recommend that jurisdictions review these practices as a matter of urgency.
3. Ask the Federal Government to increase resources to Commonwealth and State archives and records agencies, including State Records SA, so that trauma-informed, culturally safer archival access can be facilitated.
4. Review the status of the administration of existing Stolen Wages schemes in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory (Commonwealth) and seek updates on any commitments to archival justice and stolen wages redress in other States and Territories.
5. Review tendering and procurement processes for the administration of any future schemes aimed at redress for Aboriginal people.

We finish this submission with a quote from ***Friday essay: 'Like a detective examining a crime scene.'* Natalie Harkin charts the intimate history of Aboriginal domestic service**, The Conversation.

“I dip in and out, lured to new depths of surveillance data stirring on unthinkable currents. There are no limits to these domestic service files. No solid foundation to ultimately reach or push back and spring up from: just murky beginnings and slick surfaces. I navigate slowly through thousands of carefully crafted handwritten and typed letters and file notes and do my best to make sense of the chaos.

This is private, intimate reading, and these young women and girls will not let me rest. Their voices penetrate every membrane of every cell in my body until I recognise them as my own, and like proper good nannas and aunties, they are not letting me off the hook. Their apron linen is pressed against my skin, and I see their dust rise and float on shards of light. My hands are red-raw and my back aches.

This is my uncanny triggering. A persistent prickling of fine hair at the nape of my neck, all fight-flight and fury, and haunted into action.

There are generations of containment in these files. Our women and girls, our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. The names are familiar, and my family are represented in these files too. They are all calling me back and pushing me forward and I have no choice but to respond.”

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