

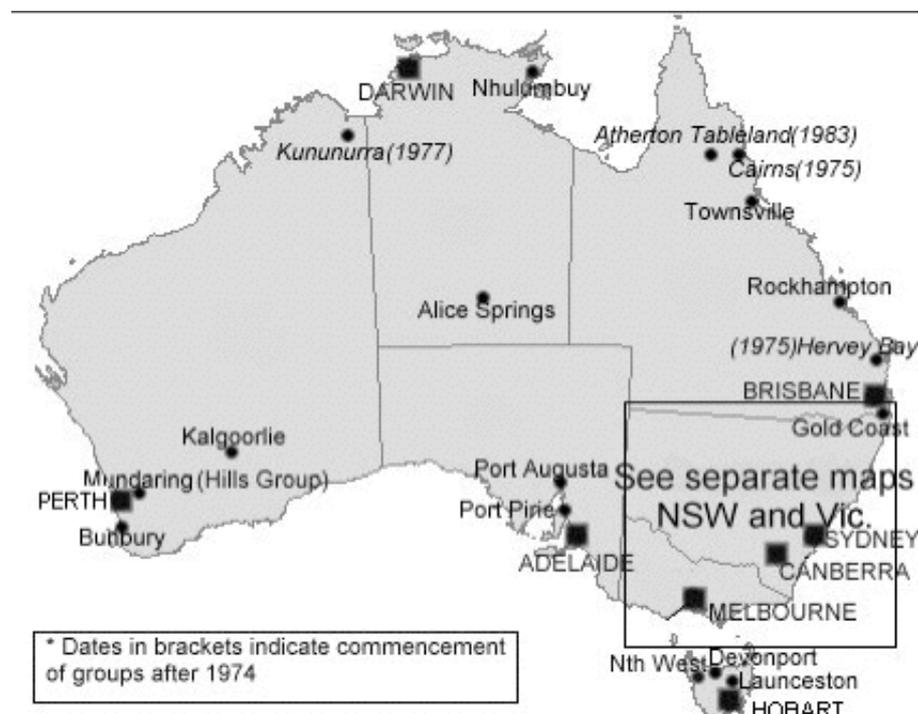
Location of WEL groups 1974

Due to the non-hierarchical principles espoused by WEL there was no national office in the early years nor any centralised collection of membership statistics. What evidence is available suggests WEL's total membership rose to 6000 by 1974. The membership was by no means confined to the capital cities, as might be imagined. WEL groups could be found across the continent, as shown in the following maps.¹

The need to interview parliamentary candidates in country areas provided impetus for rural recruitment. However many of those recruited were 'outsiders' such as teachers in country towns rather than 'farmers' wives' as farm women were then usually called. This meant that WEL groups tended to be transient rather than firmly rooted in the rural landscape. For this reason the spread of WEL in the countryside in the 1970s is often overlooked today, despite its impact on regional towns where women's liberation had barely penetrated. WEL members successfully lobbied local government for better employment opportunities for women and for improved services, including childcare. They also initiated domestic violence and women's health services in regional areas.

By the end of 1972 there were WEL groups in each capital city, except Perth, where the first meeting did not take place until March 1973. As membership grew, separate groups were formed in the suburbs and also in regional and rural centres. The following maps show the distribution of WEL groups (excluding suburban groups) in 1974, together with some later regional groups as indicated.

Map 1. WEL groups—1974



¹ The maps were prepared by Robin Tennant-Wood, a member of WEL-ACT.

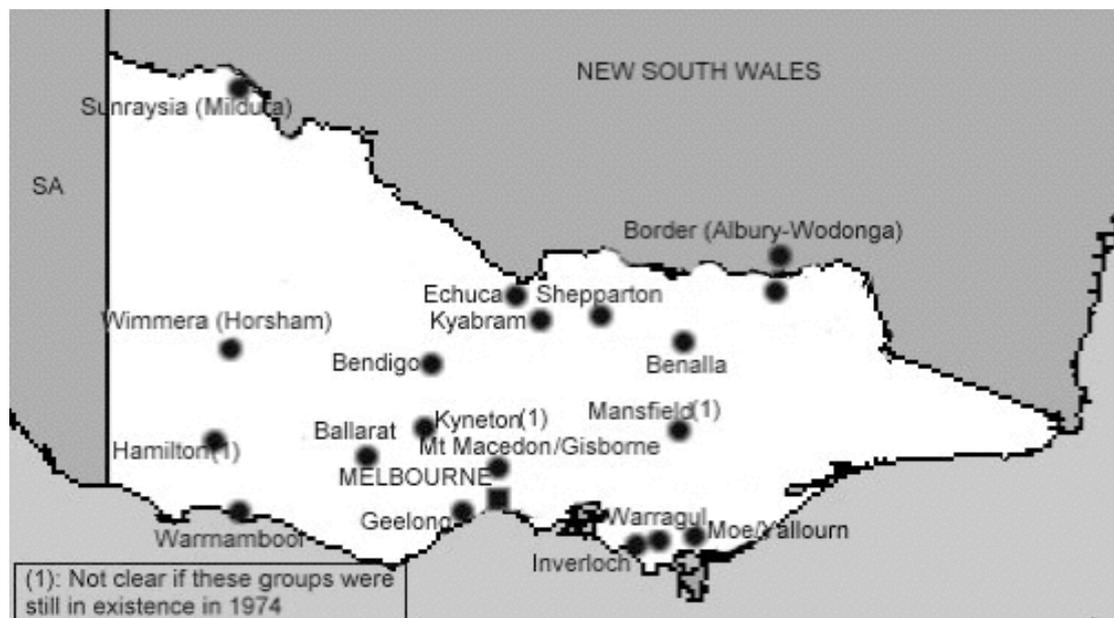
Map 1 shows the distribution of WEL groups across Australia with the exception of NSW and Victoria. In Western Australia there were groups in Perth, Bunbury, Kalgoorlie and Mundaring in 1974. Kalgoorlie only met several times in 1974, while Bunbury and Mundaring, also known as the Hills Group – Darling Range, were active for a number of years. Kununurra started in 1977, it was concerned about women’s health, the need for a women’s refuge and the education of Aboriginal girls, but it lapsed after a year or so. Perth has a proud record of achievement in relation to equal opportunity legislation, women’s policy machinery and services. In 1998 it was part of the successful campaign for abortion law reform and is still active today.

In Queensland there were groups in Brisbane, Gold Coast, Rockhampton and Townsville in 1974. Cairns and Hervey Bay both started in 1975 and Atherton Tableland formed in 1983, subsequently joining with WEL Cairns. Hervey Bay was an active group and Joan Trewern of WEL Cairns still publishes a regular newsletter. The 1992 research and campaigning by WEL Brisbane on the potential impact of the GST on supermarket prices (*The GST: Its Impact on the Household Budget*) made it very unpopular with the then federal Opposition.

In South Australia Adelaide, Port Augusta and Port Pirie were all in existence by 1974. In Tasmania WEL Groups were active in Hobart, Devonport, Launceston and the North West Coast and were busy spreading the message by giving talks in schools and clubs.

In the Northern Territory there were groups in Darwin and Alice Springs and the group at Nhulumbuy also appears to have started by 1974. It was responsible (with assistance from WEL-Sydney) for a heartfelt submission seeking funding for a women’s centre and setting out all the problems of life in an isolated company town.

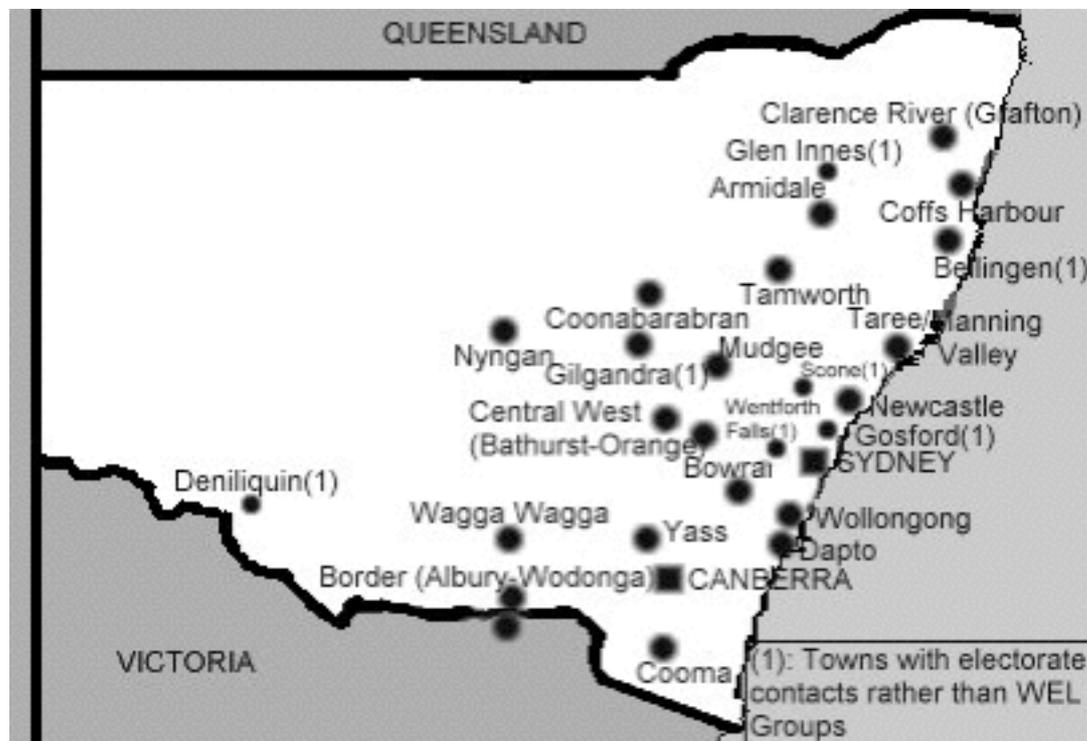
Map 2. WEL groups in Victoria—1974



Map 2 shows WEL groups in existence in Victoria in 1974. Wodonga was part of a WEL group called Border WEL whose members came from the Victorian town of Wodonga and the New South Wales town of Albury. As a result both States claimed Border WEL as one of their groups.

The Hamilton, Kyneton and Mansfield groups were started in 1972 but it is unclear if they were still in existence in 1974. While the founding of groups was recorded in local newspapers and in WEL newsletters, their disbanding tended to go unrecorded. Hamilton, Kyneton and Mansfield were founded by Chris Hollis and Margery Webster, who travelled more than a thousand miles around country Victoria interviewing candidates in 1972, getting good publicity for WEL in country papers and starting local WEL groups.

Map 3. WEL Groups in NSW—1974



Map 3 shows WEL groups in New South Wales in 1974. Sometimes there is insufficient evidence to show whether these are actual groups or only individuals who acted as electorate contacts. Unlike WEL New Zealand there were no hard and fast rules about what constituted a WEL group. WEL in Australia grew out of Women's Liberation and had a distrust of formal structures and the imposition of rules. They shared the belief in the connection between organisational hierarchy, patriarchy and the disempowerment of women. WEL in New Zealand did not start until 1975 and was always a more formal organisation. To form a WEL group in New Zealand you had to have at least 10 members, pay \$5 a head to WEL in Wellington and agree not to work against national WEL policy. It appears that, if your numbers fell below 10 you could no longer be considered a WEL group. There were no such rules in Australia where fluidity and improvisation reigned.