

Pay equity

ALIA in the thick of New South Wales wage case



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For many years, librarians have felt the effects of gender differences in earnings. And, for all the talk of equal opportunity, the last decade has seen virtually no change in aggregate wage relativity between men and women in Australia. Total weekly earnings for adult males still exceed those of women by at least twenty-five per cent.

Despite this, the centralised Australian wage-fixing system which applied until recently has still produced far-better wage outcomes for women than in most similar countries. Britain, the United States of America and Canada, for example, all show much greater gender inequity than Australia, which has one of the smallest female-male wage differentials among all industrialised countries. So it could be worse. But nobody should be complacent, especially since the system which has provided some protection for women workers in this country has now been substantially dismantled. There are now fears that, as Australia's industrial relations system becomes more like that of these other countries, our wage outcomes will also come to resemble theirs.

Under this cloud, ALIA members, and indeed all librarians — male or female — should welcome any action by governments to emphasise the work value of the so-called feminised occupations. Currently, one potential ray of sunshine is the New South Wales Pay Equity Inquiry which is now gaining momentum. ALIA National Office has been taking a keen interest in this development for some time and has already contributed substantially to it.

Following proclamation of its new industrial laws in late-1996, the New South Wales Government — mindful of concerns being expressed about the effects of enterprise bargaining on women — established the framework for a state pay equity strategy. Five key result areas identified were: a) redressing the undervaluation of women's skills and occupational segregation and providing access to other forms of remuneration; b) facilitating equitable workplace change; c) eliminating discrimination in industrial instruments; d) increasing access to career paths and training; and e) promoting the state public sector as a model of excellence.

A taskforce was established and soon produced an important issues paper, *A woman's worth* (ISBN 0 7310 7312 6). At this time ALIA National Office made contact with the taskforce secretariat and urged consideration of library workers as a focus group for policy considerations and for development of its recommendations to the government. Later, ALIA supplied a range of information about library work to assist the taskforce.

In November 1997, State industrial relations minister, Jeff Shaw QC, formally directed the Industrial Relations Commission of New South Wales to conduct a full pay equity inquiry. Terms of reference are lengthy but, in summary, require the Commission to establish whether work in female-dominated industries is undervalued when compared with male-dominated sectors.

In doing so, the Commission is to review work-value tests and job evaluation procedures and to consider all matters concerning discrimination by reference to the *NSW Anti-Discrimination Act 1977* and relevant international labour conventions. Having done so, the Commission will then recommend a framework for remedial measures and establish principles for subsequent pay cases.

Critically, the minister has asked the Commission to identify particular occupational groupings as the focus for study of wage levels and job evaluation processes and as the basis for its findings and recommendations. ALIA National Office has argued strongly for inclusion of library workers as a key focus group. Formal hearings in the Industrial Commission began in mid-January and soon after, the Crown solicitor, on behalf of the government, advised counsel assisting the Pay Equity Inquiry that the government would be nominating just three occupational groupings as the basis for developing a Crown case to be put to the Inquiry. They are child-care workers, librarians and hairdressers.

The Crown's case is now being developed within the Premier's Department and should be completed in March. Officers of the Premier's Department and the Office of the Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment (ODEOPE), who are responsible for preparing the government's submission, have requested involvement and further contributions from ALIA National Office and we are continuing discussions with them. An important evidentiary component is likely to be a case study, sponsored by the NSW State Library, in which a representative sample of twenty professional librarian jobs have been compared with twenty benchmarked professional geoscientist jobs in the Department of Mineral Resources.

The New South Wales Pay Equity Inquiry is a rare opportunity for the relative worth of library and information work to be acknowledged formally in Australia's wage fixation process. It suggests real potential for redress of long-standing inequities, especially if — as seems likely — the state government shows formal support for library workers. On behalf of library workers everywhere, ALIA will continue its involvement in this important case. ■

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