

## Librarians await historic decision



**Phil Teece**

Manager,  
personnel &  
industrial relations

With its findings imminent, it is already clear that the landmark New South Wales Pay Equity Inquiry has unearthed extensive evidence of unfairness for women at work. Librarians are identified as among the most obvious sufferers.

The Inquiry has been conducted over several months by Justice Glynn at the request of Attorney-General and Industrial Relations Minister, Jeff Shaw QC. It has been described as the most significant event for equality at work since 1972, when Australia adopted the equal-pay principle. The judge is expected to release her final report very shortly.

ALIA played an important role in ensuring that better pay for librarians was high on the list of issues for consideration by the Inquiry. In particular, we were invited to assist in preparation of the Government's own submissions. We are pleased that many of our suggestions have been well received. And we are delighted that the Crown case deals directly with librarians and features them strongly in its formal recommendations. The Government has proposed a new classification structure and career path for public-sector librarians, based on the demonstrated value of their work, together with revised pay scales to rectify the clear pay inequity which has been identified. This is a real achievement for ALIA. It has great significance for our members — immediately in New South Wales, and potentially elsewhere.

The value of these librarian-specific submissions is enhanced by the Government's more general recommendations. For years, some ALIA members have been discriminated against where non-cash employment benefits are concerned. This has seen librarians receiving lower salary packages than other employees with whom they are rated equal in work-value terms. The Crown case to the Inquiry deals specifically with this form of discrimination by recommending formal adoption by New South Wales of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 100. For all purposes throughout New South Wales, this would define remuneration as *'the ordinary basic or minimum wage or salary and any additional emoluments whatever, payable directly or indirectly whether in cash or kind, by the employer arising out of the worker's employment'*. No longer would employers be able to discriminate between otherwise equally-classified workers by granting allowances, motor vehicles or other privileges to the favoured (usually male) few.

A particularly interesting issue which has been put before the Inquiry is that of 'value'. There have been strong suspicions for many years now that the concept of work value has been highly gendered with systemic undervalu-

ing of the skills and abilities inherent in 'women's work'. This explains much of the relative pay disadvantage of librarians which was highlighted in ALIA's recent national labour market survey. This material was put before Justice Glynn during the Inquiry. The Crown now proposes adoption of a formal Pay Equity Principle through which the Industrial Relations Commission can identify gender-based pay inequity and make decisions to remove it. The Commission would be compelled to address the Principle in all its decisions on pay and related matters. Incorporated within the Principle would be a new work and job evaluation test ensuring that work is defined and assessed objectively, transparently and fairly.

If these very encouraging Crown recommendations are adopted, the Inquiry will have revolutionised wage fixing in New South Wales. For librarians, this can only be positive.

For many years now, both labour market analysts and social justice crusaders have been stressing the virtues of workforce diversity. Both have recognised the benefits to be gained from true equal opportunity programs. Both seek to open up the workplace to a wider range of people, who can bring a variety of backgrounds, experience and attitudes to bear on organisational problems. The equity argument stresses fairness and equality before the law; the efficiency arm identifies a broader knowledge base, more flexible labour and multi-skilled work teams. An important result has been the so-called feminisation of professional and management practice, involving, for example, more participative decision-making, conscious nurturing of ideas and people, and much greater emphasis on teamwork.

The present struggle between this new workplace style and the more traditional control-model is a whole subject in itself. Nowhere is it more entertainingly discussed than in Helena Cornelius' splendid book, *The gentle revolution*, Simon & Schuster, 1998, ISBN 0 7318 0571 2. Cornelius makes a compelling case for the elimination of gender stereotyping, on grounds of both fairness and effectiveness. She shows clearly that much can be gained from blending what have been seen as typically male and female attitudes and characteristics at work. If it is true, as she says, that women's skills and attitudes are frequently underestimated, and therefore underused, in many of our organisations, then it follows that all industry parties have a vested interest in promoting them more actively.

No recognition of employee value is more obvious than what we pay for it. Justice Glynn's forthcoming Pay Equity decision is a unique opportunity for the work of New South Wales women, and librarians, to receive at last the recognition it deserves. ■

*...the concept of work value has been highly gendered, with systemic undervaluing of the skills and abilities inherent in women's work...*