



OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

Next year will mark 30 years since the formation of the Status of Women in Librarianship special interest group of the Library Association of Australia (LAA, now ALIA). As one of the creators of this Special Interest Group (SIG), I was invited to comment on this anniversary, but must declare that this child had many mothers and fathers.

I must first acknowledge the outstanding work of Vanessa Bourne, Michael Hill, and Barrie Mitcheson, who prepared a two-volume report on research into 'Library and Information Work, the employment market', published in 1982 by LAA, a massive effort in a time when publishing a report of this type required manual collation of questionnaires, typing, and manual layout. Looking at the report today, retrieved from the stacks at SLQ, shows that, like most 'grey literature' of the time, it was not typeset, let alone conventionally published!

The findings of this comprehensive study showed that in a profession consisting of 81% female workers, only one senior position (head of a national, state, or university library) was a woman. Barry MacIntyre, a fellow educator at RMIT, highlighted these findings at the Library Workforce Conference held in Melbourne in November 1982. I was shocked by these findings and we decided to take action. Aware of the movement in the U.S. for 'comparable pay for comparable work', and in line with the international movement, we applied to the LAA to establish a Standing Committee for the Status of Women in Librarianship. Eventually we were able to establish a Special Interest Group with LAA affiliation and funding.

However, from the beginning there was a misunderstanding about the role and purpose of the group. More than 800 LAA members affiliated with the Group over the following three to five years, but from my experience as a co-convenor in the first year, I believe many of these saw the group as supporting feminism in librarianship.

While a feminist cause is a legitimate cause, and one I would enthusiastically support, this was a campaign to raise the standard of remuneration for *all* librarians, not just the women, the argument being that the 'feminised' professions such as nursing, teaching, and librarianship, were underpaid because they were predominately women, and we wanted to change that.

That this was not understood was demonstrated to me in a number of ways and I hesitate to give

these examples, but I do because they serve to illustrate how misguided advocacy can be when it strays from the evidence in the professional literature.

First, there were members who insisted that, as a man, the other co-convenor could not participate in the campaign. Given that Barry MacIntyre was the researcher who highlighted the issue in a public forum (i.e. a national conference), it was perfectly sensible for him to lead and participate in the campaign.

Another example, apparently trivial but just as misguided, was the complaint that our meetings, which I chaired, were too 'masculine' because I prepared, and was guided by, an 'agenda'!

Needless to say, I quickly lost patience and left the group, at which point Ginette de Gooijer took on the role of Convenor for five years. From 1983 to 1988, Ginette ably led a group which had as its objectives the promotion of women in librarianship. I must congratulate Ginette for her work with the Group, but point out that this was not the reason for its establishment in the first instance. While I know that the situation for female librarians in Australia has improved significantly since the 1980s, I doubt whether the relative level of remuneration for this 'feminised' profession has improved overall, which was our original aim.

That librarians would neglect the evidence so clearly outlined in our professional literature disturbed me then and makes me wonder how we survive as a profession. Surely the way in which librarians add value to society is through our knowledge of literature and of research, our ability to review and select, to discriminate and distinguish what is authoritative and what is not?

Our advocacy depends upon our clear understanding of the research and staying 'on message'. I wonder if we are any more capable today of analysing and synthesising the evidence so that we can mount a convincing advocacy case for libraries, reading, literacy, or the industry. I am interested in what you think.

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