

A response to ages past. Commentary on Harris, R. M., Michell, B.G. & Cooley. C. (1985) The Gender Gap in Library Education.

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Human resource planning is an issue of considerable concern throughout the world: not least in the West as those in the post WWII population bubble known as the “baby boomers” move from paid work into retirement. This will leave a considerable deficiency in available workers as we move into the mid-21st century. There is also a considerable shift in employment patterns as political, economic and social power moves from North America to Asia. The rise and rise of China and India as places with an emerging middle-class will have an enormous impact on who does what, and where this work is done. One is perhaps more acutely aware of this when one lives in the Asia-Pacific region as I do. With these changes upon us, we need to manage our human resources well to ensure that there are skilled workers in the right places to do the work that needs doing. This is no less the case in the information professions—and perhaps more so because of the place in history where we find ourselves.

When Roma Harris and her colleagues from the University of Western Ontario wrote *The Gender Gap in Library Education* in 1985, they reviewed employment patterns in library education from 1965 to 1983. In that era much was different in the world of work, especially for women and especially in the earlier years of that

time period. The ready availability of reliable birth control and the changing attitudes to the role of women as a result of the rise of second wave feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, changed patterns of employment with great effect. This was particularly so in North America where this research was undertaken. The lives of women in other Western countries were similarly changed in this period, not least by the wide scale availability and acceptance of university education for women.

In the second decade of the 21st century women now outnumber men as graduates in many countries. Workplaces have changed and a significant number of professions, not least the academe, have introduced quotas to support the movement of women in to positions of leadership. When one attends conferences and symposia focusing on the needs of faculty in Schools of Library Education (such as the annual ALISE conference) one searches for the “token man” in the room. In publications for library educators such as JELIS there is a significant gender bias in the papers submitted. And this bias is towards women.

Much too has changed in the information environment since the years of Harris’ review. Many library schools have closed or been absorbed into other departments and in recent time numerous jurisdictions have conducted reviews of “library educa-

tion” to assess education, training, and human resource needs for the future (American Library Association, 2009; Chawner & Oliver, 2012; Cossham, Wellstead, & Welland, 2014; Hall, 2009; Partridge et al., 2011; Simmons & Corral, 2010). And of particular significance has been the impact of technology that has rendered the work of librarians and information workers almost unknowable to those teaching in the period 1965-1983. As a result of these reviews and technological changes many universities have renamed their Schools of Library Education as iSchools or Schools of Information.

But where have these sociological and technological changes led us over the last 30 years in terms of employment patterns? It is clear that women now outnumber men in LIS faculty and have significant opportunities for career advancement in the academe and elsewhere in the profession. But what has not changed is that librarianship (and most forms of “information work” more generally) is still considered a profession for women, and often there is not even that “token man” in libraries one visits, or in the classes one teaches.

So as many things have changed, as Lorie Roy points out in her review of Jane Robbins Carter’s paper on Multi-cultural Graduate Library Education in this volume, many things in our profession have remained the same. Librarianship is still seen, largely, as a profession for white middle-class women of a certain disposition. One outcome of the rise of women into positions of faculty leadership is that men are no longer visible at all: either as faculty (as in the past) or as students.

Why is this so? In an era of rapid technological change in the information landscape and corresponding changes in the work that librarians and information workers actually do, why have these changes not seen consequent changes in the perception of the role of libraries and library staff, and the type of students we attract to our programmes? Surely these changes in work design would have led to the appeal

of this work to a wider cohort of students?

Perhaps the answer is more fundamental than we might want to believe. While technology is changing information access, dissemination, and use in profound ways, the role of books in the experience of early childhood learning is still equally profound. The first exposure most children have to a library and a “librarian” is the school library. The joy that these children have in handling books in this setting is palpable. And most of the work undertaken to support these activities (often voluntarily) is done by women. Women also read for leisure much more than men so children are more likely to see their mother reading than their father. These two enduring social truths, especially in the Western world, impact on the deeply embedded perceptions that we carry forward into our employment choices. In short, we like to do things we enjoy, and those that have pleasant resonance with our past experiences.

Women, even professional women, are more likely to work part-time than men. This frees them up to use their skills to undertake tasks such as volunteering in their children’s school. One of these volunteer tasks is often to assist in the library. This work is pleasurable and enjoyable and often leads these women to enrol in library education programmes (the case of the “accidental librarian”). It also gives children a visual clue about who does this work. A resonance they may carry with them as they move through their schooling and beyond, which in turn impacts on their own employment choices.

Perhaps the answer to the conundrum about attracting more men into the library profession is one about having a wider debate about the societal benefits of more flexible employment, especially for men. If men had more opportunity to negotiate flexible work arrangements to support their childcare obligations (as women have been able to do in many domains) then the “library lady” at kindergartens and primary schools might look quite dif-

ferent indeed! And there is no doubt we would all benefit from that. Not least, because skill shortages, and workforce planning to accommodate these shortages, require change as a matter of some urgency. A gendered workforce is not the one that will be in the best interest of the information professions as we move forward into the second half of the 21st century.

On a personal note, I had the pleasure of meeting and discussing my doctoral work with Roma Harris at the Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) conference held in Sydney in 2006. She showed an interest in my research about the informational needs of men experiencing life stress and duress. This research resonated with her work about the barriers women experience when accessing help at during periods of life crisis (Harris & Dewdney, 1994). This meeting and our subsequent email conversations were important steps on my research journey. I will always be grateful to have had it.

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