

# Making the Link

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**INDUSTRIAL relations conferences have often been notable for the absence of women as speakers and by the lack of any special attention to issues related specifically to the employment of women.**

I can recall three major conferences during the last three years where all the advertised speakers were men, and none of the content suggested a focus on women's employment issues. When I challenged the organisers of these conferences as to why this was so, the explanation was that senior women in industrial relations were hard to come by, and of course the conference organisers wanted distinguished speakers!

This publication is based on the papers delivered at the first major conference in Australia which drew boldly and clearly the link between women, management and industrial relations. The conference which was organised by the Labour-Management Studies Foundation at Macquarie University's Graduate School of Management drew a full-house. The papers are by a number of distinguished speakers, many of them women!

As Professor Di Yerbury said in her opening address to the conference, 'management and industrial relations has in the past been the domain of males ... but, it is changing'.

Decisions by industrial relations tribunals in the first half of this century are littered with cases where rigid demarcations were drawn between 'men's work' and 'women's work'.

Women were allowed to work in areas which were seen as an extension of what they did at home, for example sewing, laundry and nursing, but, work performed by women failed to qualify as a trade and was considered unskilled. For example, men who did ironing were called pressers and considered highly skilled. Women who ironed for a living were unskilled.

The legacy is that today Australia has the most sex-segregated labour force in the Western world. This sex-based division of labour also contributes to wage discrimination or a lack of equal pay for work of equal value.

Recognition of this has contributed to the introduction of legislation designed to eliminate discrimination against women in employment. Today decisions of the Federal Industrial Relations Commission should be gender neutral in effect because Section 93 of the *Industrial Relations Act 1988* re-

quires the Commission in the performance of its duties to take account of the principles embodied in the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* and the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* relating to employment. Consideration must now be given to the results or outcomes to ensure that the proposals and decisions do not have a disproportionate impact on women or other groups in the workforce.

Women do not have the same career structures or opportunities as men and even where they do have the same rights as men, because of their other obligations they are unable to take up these opportunities at the same rate as men. This paints a picture of inadequate use of women's skills. If these factors are not addressed now through affirmative action programs and industrial relations reform they will be perpetuated and the goal of sustained economic growth will be elusive.

Put another way this means that issues affecting women workers need to be addressed in any proposals for industrial relations reform, in any changes to the industrial relations systems, in negotiations around the implementation of the structural efficiency principle and in the development of enterprise bargaining.

The papers herein are a significant contribution to our understanding of the nature of the links between women, management and industrial relations of the past, and suggest changes to ensure a future where women have full access to jobs and career opportunities.