

Women Lawyers in a public world

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In August this year the Australian Women Lawyers (AWL) held its Fourth National Conference at the Australian National University in Canberra. The Conference saw over one hundred women lawyers from across Australia (including six representatives from the Territory) come together to explore the theme 'Women Lawyers in a Public World'. AWL was established in 1997 with a primary focus on issues relating to the practice and advancement of women in the legal profession. It also works to eliminate both direct and indirect discrimination against women in the legal system and the community generally, and provides a professional and social network for women lawyers. With those aims in mind, the Fourth National Conference provided an occasion for a number of prominent women (and one prominent man!) to speak about the opportunities and challenges faced by women practicing law in today's world. As this was my first such Conference, I was struck by the collegiality of all who attended, and took the opportunity to share experiences with both renowned and upcoming women lawyers from a range of areas of practice.

The Conference began on Friday night with a Welcome Reception at the Grand Hall of ANU's University House. We were privileged to hear from both the AWL patron, the Hon Diana Bryant AO, Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia, and the Hon Nicola Roxon MP, Commonwealth Attorney General, who gave inspiring opening

addresses and set the tone for the remainder of the Conference. The substantive part of the Conference commenced on the Saturday with an introduction by the Hon Robert French AC, Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, who spoke of the achievements of a woman lawyer very close to him: his wife, Valerie French, formerly a judge of the District Court of Western Australia.

The first keynote address was given by the Hon Justice Virginia Bell, Judge of the High Court of Australia. Her Honour 'ditched' the topic assigned to her and instead focused on the question of why the bar does not attract and retain more women barristers, despite the fact that women have graduated from law schools at the same or higher levels than men for the last three decades. The next keynote address was given by Ms Penny Williams, Global Ambassador for Women and Girls from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, who spoke just shy of the first anniversary of her appointment to that role. She emphasised the particular capacity of women in the legal profession to address issues impacting on women in Australia and internationally. She inspired us to exercise that capacity with accounts of sexual violence being used as a weapon of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the work of a female village magistrate in Papua New Guinea who has taken a unique approach to sentencing in cases of domestic violence, and the shocking statistic that a girl living in south Sudan

today is more likely to die in childbirth than to complete primary school. She invited us to 'roll up our sleeves, as there is much work to be done'.

Professor Kim Rubenstein, Director of the Centre for International and Public Law at the Australian National University College of Law, provided an update on the progress of ANU's 'Trailblazing Women and the Law' project, undertaken in partnership with the National Library of Australia. This project provides an oral history of trailblazing women lawyers around the country and across several generations. Interviewees so far include the first woman to sign the bar roll in Western Australia, the first woman to have a speaking role in a matter before an international tribunal, and the first Indigenous Australian woman to be appointed by the Government to a United Nations body. The Conference presenters themselves included a number of trailblazing lawyers. Presentations at the Conference on substantive law topics – ranging from digital intellectual property rights, construction law and social media – highlighted some of the outstanding contributions made by female practitioners in these areas of law.

A discussion panel on 'Surviving and Thriving as a Woman in the Law: Attrition, Retention and Progression' provided an opportunity for three outstanding women lawyers to speak about their careers to date. The speakers – Fiona McLeod SC (a barrister at the Victorian Bar), Marion



Rodwell (General Counsel and Company Secretary with Myer) and the Territory's own Dr Nanette Rogers SC (Assistant Director of the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions) – discussed issues ranging from how to plan career breaks and ensure smooth re-entry into the workforce, discrimination against women in the legal profession, the value of mentors and how to find one, and the importance of supporting other women lawyers and singing each other's praises. The interactive nature of this panel discussion highlighted the concerning number of women who have been 'put down' in the course of their careers because of their gender.

The personal experiences shared during the question and answer session with Fiona, Marion and Nanette led neatly into the presentations on the advancement of women in the legal profession by representatives from the New South Wales Law Society and on workplace bullying by Associate Professor Maryam Omari. Professor Omari, who is Program Director of MBA and Graduate Studies at the Faculty of Business and Law at Edith Cowan University, highlighted the causes of workplace bullying, which included not only the 'abnormal' or 'sociopathic' personality of the bully and the

vulnerability of the victim, but also the 'organisational climate' of the workplace environment and the standards set by the leadership. Professor Omari provided us with a number of shocking quotations from women lawyers interviewed as part of her research. One example was as follows:

"It's like going back to the 1950s. If you're assertive, strong and opinionated – you're a pushy bitch. If you're male, it's considered perfectly normal or a non-issue."

Of interest to *Balance* readers, Trish Mundy, a Lecturer in the Faculty of Law at the University of Wollongong, presented on the topic 'Female Lawyers Practising in Rural, Regional and Remote Communities'. She noted that to date, relatively little attention has been given to the particular experiences and retention issues for women working in such communities. Her current research into lived experiences of women lawyers in rural, regional and remote communities in Queensland highlights some of the particular opportunities and challenges posed by legal practice in those communities. Opportunities included breadth of professional experience and

quicker career progression, while challenges included professional isolation and increased visibility within the community one works in, which may be detrimental to work-life balance.

The highlight of the Conference was the Gala Dinner held at the magnificent Gandel Hall at the National Gallery of Australia, the focus of which was the inauguration of the Australian Women Lawyers Award. The award provides an opportunity for women lawyers to collectively celebrate the achievements of other women in our profession. The inaugural recipient of the award was to Elizabeth Heenan, special counsel at Culshaw Miller, solicitors in Perth. Elizabeth was recognised for her outstanding contribution over the last 30 years to the Australian legal community, including through her work with the West Australia Law Society, Women Lawyers of WA, the Law Council of Australia, and Curtin University. She is also a founding member of AWL. No doubt equally impressive recipients will follow in the years to come. ●

Sarah's attendance at the Conference was kindly sponsored by NTWLA.

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