



**SUPREME COURT  
OF QUEENSLAND**

QELA International Women's Day Event  
Blackbird Bar & Grill, Eagle Street, Brisbane  
27 April 2022

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**The Hon Helen Bowskill  
Chief Justice**

My thanks to Sarah Hausler, the President of the Queensland Environmental Law Association, for inviting me today. It is lovely to be here, and to share this occasion with all of you, in celebration of International Women's Day for 2022. I'm delighted to share the speaking stage today with Judge Cathy Muir and Rebecca Hoare.

I mentioned to Sarah late last week that, in my naive enthusiasm upon commencing in my new job – which is still only four weeks old – I was quick to say yes when various people asked me to speak at things. Before I knew it, I seemed to have amassed a number of speaking engagements, and panic set in. It is still there. I said to Sarah that I was not sure what I would be able to prepare for today and that I may have to “fly by the seat of my pants”. Sarah very kindly said, why don't we describe it as authentic and from the heart? So, that's how it will be.

The theme for International Women's Day this year is “gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow”.

In that regard, the International Women's Day [website](#) invites us to “imagine a world free of bias, stereotypes and discrimination. A world that's diverse, equitable, and inclusive. A world where difference is valued and celebrated.”

One of the missions identified as part of achieving that vision is to build workplaces where women thrive.

My workplace – as a judge of a court – is one in which I have been able to thrive and succeed, with the support and encouragement of all of my colleagues, male and female. I have always felt that, both on the District Court and on the Supreme Court. The public acknowledgment of it, when I was recently sworn in as Chief Justice, was a very significant moment for me; but also a significant moment in history, I think, as Justice Sofronoff, the President of the Court of Appeal, referred to the generational change that has come to pass amongst the judiciary, and the positive shift in perspective that brings, to judicial practice and the shaping of the law. That shift in perspective is necessary, for the judiciary – as one of the three arms of government – to keep pace with the community it serves.

That shift in perspective is not only due to greater gender diversity, but that is an important part of it: an example of gender equality today leading to a sustainable tomorrow.

The Courts in Queensland are doing pretty well, in terms of gender equality. On the Supreme Court at present, out of 28 Judges, 8 are women – just short of 30%. We are onto our second female Chief Justice. Of the District Court's 40 judges, 13 are women – just over 30%. The Magistrates Court, I think I'm right in saying, boasts 45% women Magistrates. The Land Court has reached gender equity, and is also onto its second female President, President Kingham.

So, how do we build workplaces – or perhaps more broadly, professional environments – where women thrive?

I happened upon an interesting article in the Law Society Journal, entitled "Tea with a trailblazer", which was an interview with Margaret Beazley, now the Governor of New South Wales, but formerly the President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal. The article records that "although gender bias and all that goes with it, including sexism, harassment and bullying, was a part of Governor Beazley's experience at the Bar, she says she never encountered it among her judicial colleagues." Whilst the rates of harassment amongst lawyers are shocking, Governor Beazley is recorded as saying "there was no air for such ugly behaviour on the bench, and she believes pay equity had a huge role to play in that". All judges on the same bench are paid the same. As she said, "when equal pay is part of the package, it becomes part of the ethos. Money has a power aspect to it that you can't ignore".

Whilst there is no pay gap between judges sitting on the same bench – the situation in the broader community is not so good. According to the [Women's Gender Equality Agency](#), the current total remuneration private sector gender pay gap is 22.8%, which means men working in the private sector earn \$25,800 on average a year more than women. In relation to the public sector, there is an article in the newspaper today highlighting the findings of an audit of the Industrial Relations Act, which makes recommendations about the availability of data addressing gender pay equality, which reveals the gender pay disparity within various government departments.

Closing this pay gap is one way to build a workplace where women thrive and succeed. Of course that is not only about money, fixing it requires cultural change to remove barriers to the full and equal participation of women in the workforce.

What are those barriers?

In the legal context, the National Attrition and Re-Engagement Study (NARS) Report, prepared by the Law Council of Australia, has some answers, which I anticipate might resonate with the other professionals in the room.

- Lack of flexible work practices that facilitate work-life balance across the profession (not just for working mothers). The NARS Report identifies that for both men and women, one of the significant drivers of dissatisfaction was long working hours and the resultant poor work-life balance.
- Lack of accessibility to mentors who support your career development and opportunities for promotion or advancement. Almost one third of the women who participated in the study identified this as an issue. I will return to this in a moment.

- The perception – or reality – of bias, conscious or unconscious, against women who adopt flexible working arrangements to balance family responsibilities (for example, being allocated less interesting work, or being passed over for promotions).
- The relative lack of women in senior leadership positions.
- Discrimination and harassment at work. Shockingly, one in two women, and one in three men, reported having been bullied or intimidated in their current workplace. One in four women reported experiencing sexual harassment at work.

Addressing these barriers takes strong leadership and collective action to drive change; but it also takes individual courage.

In that latter respect, I strongly encourage you, as you make your way through the labyrinth of your particular profession, to be your authentic self. When I was a barrister, I didn't always feel as though I fitted in. I think perhaps at first it was because I was young; a young woman; my background was a bit different – having worked as a secretary, less common then than it is now; and having studied part-time. Later it was because I chose, when having children, to take time away from my practice and then to work part time, which also was not common then. I made that choice, consciously believing it would affect my career progression – reflecting one of those barriers I've just mentioned – but doing it anyway. And look, it didn't. I think that's what I mean by individual courage. Don't be afraid to make choices and decisions about your career that suit you and your family. Do what you want to do. The legal profession is a far more rich and colourful tapestry than it once was, in every sense, although we can do more to encourage greater diversity. The same must be said of the other professions represented here. If you always strive for excellence in what you choose to do, your reputation will grow and success will follow.

But of course individual courage is not enough on its own – if the structural barriers don't change.

In that regard, my next encouragement is to those who are further up the ladder, or perhaps further along the labyrinth, whichever is the preferred metaphor for professional progression. Stick your hand out and help others make their way through, or up. If you have the opportunity, do that consciously, with a view to fostering greater diversity – not only in terms of gender, but in other respects as well. This is such an important part of creating workplaces where all can thrive and succeed. Giving people the opportunity to do the harder, more interesting work, and gain the experience that brings, puts them in the position to take on the leadership positions when they arise. I know I have been the beneficiary of this during my career. Proactively supporting and encouraging a diverse range of people as they make their way up through the ranks of our respective professions is the way to ensure sustainability in the future.

Of course another important element of sustainability is of ourselves as a resource, and I will now hand over to Judge Cathy Muir who will have something to say about that.