



Australian Women Lawyers National Conference Welcome Drinks  
Friday, 5 August 2022  
College of Law Rooftop

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**Helen Bowskill**  
**Chief Justice**

Good evening everyone. It is a pleasure to be here with you this evening. My thanks to the President of your association, Ms Leah Marrone, for the invitation to join you. I acknowledge all of you as distinguished guests.

I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land in Brisbane and its surrounding areas, and pay my respects to their elders, those who have spoken for the land in the past and who do so today.

It is an honour to be here this evening, for the welcome drinks at the start of what is sure to be an excellent conference. The theme of the conference is “securing a safe, just and equitable future for women”. That theme reflects the broad objects of Australian Women Lawyers, which are not limited to matters affecting women in the legal profession, but extend to achieving justice and equality for all women.

I was interested to read that Australian Women Lawyers was established, just about 25 years ago, in September 1997. That followed, of course, the much earlier establishment of Women Lawyers’ associations in the states and territories. In Queensland, for example, the Women Lawyers Association was established in 1978.

Speaking on the occasion of the launch of Australian Women Lawyers, the Honourable Justice Mary Gaudron observed that:

“... Australian Women Lawyers [was] the beginning of a new era for women and for women lawyers, an era in which people realise that equality, equal justice and equality of opportunity are **complex ideas**, difficult to implement and achievable only by the **sustained efforts of those committed to those ideals**. They are not achievable simply on the basis that the doors are open, be they held open or battered down.”

Justice Gaudron also posed the question, “why a women lawyers’ association?”, noting that it had not always been regarded as professionally acceptable to participate in such an organisation, and was not even universally so in 1997. She suggested that may have been due, in part at least, to a failure or unwillingness to appreciate the significance of our difference. As she said “when we admit that difference, when we assert our right to be different, we are going to be significantly better lawyers”. Her Honour emphasised that equality is not “sameness”. Rather, equality involves the recognition of genuine difference and, where it exists, different treatment adapted to that difference.

Her Honour launched the Australian Women Lawyers with a rousing “Go to it! Go be yourselves!”

I love that message. It reflects a message I want to convey to all lawyers, not just women lawyers, which is not to be afraid to be your authentic self, both in how you conduct your practice as a lawyer, but also in making decisions and choices about your career that suit you and your family. You will be empowered when you do this; it is in fact much easier to be yourself than to try to emulate others. To quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Essays*, which I came across in Amor Towles’ novel, *The Lincoln Highway* (and adapting to remove the exclusionary language): “There is a time in every person’s education when they arrive at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; and that they must take themselves for better or worse”. That time is now.

There is no stereotypic notion of what a good lawyer, be they a solicitor or a barrister or a judge for that matter, is or looks like. In fact, I had a funny moment a couple of months ago, when I was walking along the corridor in the judges’ chambers at the QEII Court building. I saw two of my colleagues chatting and we all took a moment to laugh about the fact that we were three Supreme Court judges all wearing flowery dresses – not a grey suit in sight. I should add, my colleagues were women.

But of course individual courage is not enough on its own – there has to be sustained effort and commitment to changing the structural barriers to equality, so that we can secure a safe, just and equitable future for women in the legal profession, which in turn empowers us to do that for other women as well.

One example of a proactive, structural change this year, in which the High Court has lead the way is the publication of its Justices’ Policy on Workplace Conduct. The Supreme Court of Queensland followed their lead, and issued an equivalent policy in May this year. Policies of this kind are important, particularly where, as in many aspects of the legal profession, there is the potential for significant power imbalance.

Addressing the structural barriers takes strong leadership and collective action to drive change; as well as individual courage.

So apart from encouraging you to fearlessly be yourselves and, as Justice Gaudron said, “go to it!”, I also encourage those who are further up the ladder, to 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 securing a safe, just and equitable future for women - 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.

In that respect, we have seen a lot of gains in terms of representation of women in the roughly 25 years since AWL was established.

Just using Queensland as an example:

- In terms of the judiciary:
  - we have gone from having 4 out of 26 Supreme Court judges (or 15%) in 1998 to now having 9 out of 28 (about 32%) – and, importantly, we have had two Chief Justices, two Presidents of the Court of Appeal and two Senior Judge Administrators who are women.
  - the District Court figures are roughly the same, in terms of percentages. At present, 15 of the 43 District Court judges (or just under 35% are women).
  - the Magistrates Court has done really well, increasing from around 12% to now almost 50/50 in terms of men and women Magistrates.
- In terms of the solicitors' branch of the profession, in Queensland:
  - At present, there is gender equity in terms of solicitors holding practising certificates;
  - And things are on the improve in terms of directors/partners of firms – with about 33% of those being women.
- The Bar is still male dominated, but I think a little less so than 25 years ago. Of the 987 barristers currently at the private Bar, 76% are men and 24% are women. But of that, there are 117 silks, and only 10 of those are women. We really need to encourage women to go the Bar and get access to the work that will help them rise in the ranks.

Reflecting on our achievements in the last 25 years is inspiring, although of course we can never be complacent. There have been many inspiring stories to come out of the Commonwealth Games over the past week or so. One of my favourites this week was an article about the paralympian Robyn Lambird, who is smashing misconceptions about disability and diversity. They were quoted as saying: "I always find the beauty in diversity. Diversity is one of the world's greatest teachers, I think we can learn so much about the

world and our place in it just by listening to others". Truer words were never spoken. They also speak about the power of "lifting each other up", which I encourage you all to do.

On that note, and since this is the welcome drinks, at which perhaps we can be a bit more frivolous, may I leave you with the wise words of the author, Kathy Lette: "Women are each other's human Wonderbras – uplifting, supportive and making each other look better."

I look forward to chatting with you this evening, and wish you all the best for a very successful conference this weekend.