

Deconstructing the glass ceiling



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Some of you may have recently attended the President's Luncheon which I hosted in August. Virginia Haussegger was our guest speaker talking about her book *Wonder Women – The myth of having it all* and why women pick the rotten fruit.

Virginia gave a challenging address to one of the largest audiences seen at a President's Luncheon – 270 people.

A short aspect of her talk focused on the "glass ceiling". She declared that it was, in fact, incorrectly named: the ceiling isn't glass as this implies that you could see through it and learn what was happening above. No, it was in fact, concrete with a few manholes.

I was asked to write on my views of and experiences with the glass ceiling. And, if I'm honest, the topic makes me a little uncomfortable.

Do I believe that there is a glass ceiling? Yes, I do. Would I want things changed so that there is positive discrimination in favour of women, where there are two equal candidates for a role (one male and one female)? My answer is "No".

More than half of Victoria's lawyers with experience of five years or less are female. Yet women are clearly underrepresented in the decision making echelons of law firms (and other institutions). Obviously, this underrepresentation is an issue for women, but also for men.

By failing to take into account the real life issues faced by women in the profession, the men at the top are missing out. They are not realising the long-term benefits from having another perspective in the workplace. If you only ever mix with the same people, you will rarely be challenged and, if you can't adapt, in the long run, you may not survive.

If law firms are to retain their current structure of solicitor, associate and partner, the issue of retention is important. Having women's forums and marginalising the female issues will not lead to a happy group of female lawyers. If partnership remains the end goal, then firms need to take a more proactive role in documenting and truly explaining how this goal can be achieved. There may be many routes available, and all of them need to be clearly articulated.

That being said, taking a stand on "women's" issues often leads to the feminist tag, which seems to be going through an unpopular phase at the moment. I recently read Courtney Love saying "Feminism is a dirty word . . . because . . . feminists are so ugly . . . I didn't want to be associated with feminism because I thought it would make me ugly".

"Have I ever experienced the glass ceiling?" In a way, I think so. But then again, I've also suffered the problems faced by anyone who is prepared to stand up for themselves and speak their mind. The reality of glass ceiling (greasy pole or slab of concrete with a few manholes cut out) remains in the law for either gender.

Anne Summers, a bestselling Australian author, journalist and speaker on political, social and women's issues stated that there "is no glass ceiling. [There] is outright refusal by the men who run corporate Australia to open up their ranks to competent and qualified members of the female sex".¹



The issue remains that, if a glass ceiling exists in people's minds (men or women), then for them, their community and the legal profession it becomes reality. To achieve equality we need to remove any physical glass ceiling as well as the one that exists in the minds of any men or women in our profession. Such removal should result in a change to what we currently view as a stereotypical successful male or female lawyer.

It can only benefit all of us. ■

1. Anne Summers, "The glass ceiling needs a bit of leverage", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 2003.