

Opening Address

Women's Forum on Sex Stereotyping and its Effects on Women's Health and Career Aspirations (1985)

Nancy (Nan) Giese

This year, as we celebrate the centenary of women's suffrage in Australia, it is somewhat depressing to face the fact that sex stereotyping is alive and well, and that we need to organise forums like this for women to continue to talk about the effects it has on their health and career aspirations, and how to deal with it.

Depressing but not surprising—as it is going to take a lot longer than 100 years to change the attitudes that have been firmly entrenched, promoted and encouraged as desirable for the past two millennia.

Millions of words have been written and spoken on these issues, and cynics tend to dismiss women's forums as talkfests repeating the rhetoric, a very negative and ill-considered assessment, I would say. Looking at the changes that have occurred in the last 100 years, particularly in the last 30, one can only be inspired to keep going and believe that solutions will be found.

Some very disturbing statistics have come out of the United Nations conference in Beijing. One in three women in the world today is illiterate, and 60 million girls are without access to primary school. In both illiteracy and primary education figures, female disadvantage outnumbered male two to one. No wonder that in the draft platform for action, education was one of 12 critical areas of concern. It is encouraging to note that the final conference document (although it is a non-binding blueprint for policy-makers round the world) placed unprecedented emphasis on the rights of girls and the education of women.

Closer to home, we are continuing to be presented with documented evidence of the barriers that impede women's advancement and obstruct the career aspirations of all but the strongest and most determined. A recent government study uses the term 'gender harassment' to describe 'the mysterious and disembodied negative force which isolates and marginalises women in certain fields, or excludes them altogether'. A report by the Advisory Group on Women in Science, Engineering and

Technology found that gender harassment in these areas was widespread, evident in a strong sense of masculine ownership at all levels, from education and training to research and employment.

These findings were backed up by telling statistics revealing pathetically low percentages of women's participation across a wide range of professions. Professor Mary O'Kane, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Adelaide University, and one of the Advisory Group, believes that gender harassment is unquestionably putting women off careers in science, maths and engineering, as well as other callings. Of particular concern is that, in many cases, the harassment comes not from males, but from other women, including mothers and girls' own peer groups, who put implicit pressures on them to pursue a more stereotyped female career. It is sad to think that the assumption that females have been conditioned to accept in so many aspects of their lives, that of superior male competency, still persists so strongly, in spite of the fact that EEO and Affirmative Action legislation and programs have been in place for over a decade now. Where are the effective strategies to implement the policies?

It is encouraging to note in the media in recent weeks that some of our universities are taking positive measures to address these problems with renewed vigour. Melbourne University's Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Barry Sheehan, says (somewhat optimistically I feel), that his university's EEO and Affirmative Action programs focus on measurable and concrete change, recognising that the pervasive, more difficult area of attitudinal change might be indirectly affected by the implementation of the strategies. We can only hope that this will be the case.

I embarked on a career in teaching in the days when social justice was an infrequently discussed concept, Equal Employment Opportunity was not seriously considered, and Affirmative Action hadn't even been thought of. My employer, the Queensland government's Department of Public Instruction (later to become the Department of Education) had an unambiguous policy on the status of married women. The day you made your wedding vows was the day you resigned. End of teaching career! The cost-effectiveness of the investment of taxpayers' money in three years' teacher education and training didn't appear to be of concern. From here on your career was to be a wife and mother, and we had been thoroughly conditioned to accept this.

So when I came to Darwin in 1954, I was well into my second career—an unpaid one! But it didn't take me long to realise that I could make a more worthwhile contribution to a better society than doing the housework and cooking meals for the family.

With my background in education and for personal reasons, because I now had two children in school, I took a very active interest in this area and joined every relevant organisation, becoming the President of most of them. The first big challenge was to get a full high school in Darwin. The only school, the Darwin Higher Primary School, cut off after the third year, and students wishing to matriculate for admission to a tertiary institution were forced to enrol in southern schools. This disruption to family life actually caused many families to leave the Territory, good citizens lost to a developing society that badly needed them. I was determined that wouldn't happen to me.

I learnt a lot in that exercise: to marshal community support, to cultivate the decision-makers, to keep myself fully informed at all times, to work through a committee so that you didn't seem too pushy if you came up with good ideas. If you are passionate and obsessive about what you are hoping to achieve, prepared to work hard, and never, never give up, despite all the setbacks, you will succeed in the end.

That first success (which took many years) was a great confidence-booster for me, and I went on from there to be involved in many other challenges.

There was no tertiary institution in the Northern Territory in the first two post-War decades, although an Adult Education Centre was established in Darwin in 1958. The Graduates' Association was laughed to scorn by the Commonwealth government in its attempts to establish a university in the early 1960s. But the lobbying didn't stop and, by 1968, a planning committee of which I was a member, was formed to plan a post-school institution. The outcome, after four years, was a multi-level, multi-purpose institution, the Darwin Community College, to be followed by the Alice Springs Community College, the Darwin Institute of Technology and the University College of the Northern Territory, culminating in the Northern Territory University, which opened in 1989 and now has 11,500 students. This is the institution that the pundits in Canberra dismissed as recently as 1981 as not being viable. I was heavily

involved in all of these developments, and what exciting, challenging and rewarding years they have been.

I had other interests as well. There was a lot of scope for improving the quality of life in the Northern Territory. When I moved to this beautiful part of Australia, I missed most the access I had enjoyed in the south to the performing and visual arts. It didn't take long to find many other people of like mind—and yes! we formed committees and set goals for ourselves. The most inhibiting factor was the lack of appropriate space to stage the performing arts or to house and display museum and art collections, so the quest began for a Performing Arts Centre and a Museum and Art Gallery, while organising ongoing programs in both areas. It took 10 years to get the Museum and Art Gallery building and I was proud, as a member of the Board over all those years, to be able to make a small contribution to the final achievement of the splendid complex on Bullocky Point.

The Performing Arts Centre took a little longer. While it was conceded that a museum and gallery was a desirable feature of any city, people were suspicious of a performing arts centre, and some actively opposed it, writing letters to the editor claiming that kerbs and gutters in the suburbs were a higher priority. These were very busy years, as I was helping one other person to run a substantial Territory-wide Arts Council program at the same time. But what bliss it is to enjoy the performances of great artists from all over the world in air-conditioned comfort, remembering bygone years when we sat on school chairs at Nightcliff High School, with the rain beating on the roof.

In all my years in the Territory, I haven't experienced gender discrimination personally. I was elected as Chairman of the Council of the Community College, later the Institute of Technology, and as Chancellor of the Northern Territory University by male-dominated councils.

On the Arts side, I think that everyone was so relieved to have a hard worker who didn't want to be paid to run the programs, that I wasn't seen as a threat to anyone's ambitions, so they kept electing me as President of the Arts Council. It's been a very satisfying and intensely interesting time, and I've enjoyed it all very much.

Last week I read an interesting article in the *Australian* newspaper by Gabrielle Chan, reporting that a study headed by Dr Bob Birrell, of the Centre for Population

and Urban Research, says that women should no longer be considered a disadvantaged group; that they experienced few barriers when entering the workforce; and that the days of female exclusion in male-dominated education fields, with the exception of engineering, were over. Can this be so? Is this your experience? I'm sure you will be keen to read the full report.

In the difficult area of attitudinal change, I think we all have a responsibility to our children, because attitudes begin to be formed on the day when they are born. In your home you can create an environment where children learn to respect people as people, and discrimination on any grounds is not acceptable. You can influence the curriculum that is offered in schools and in teacher education, the attitudes that teachers take into the classroom. It starts with you as an individual if you really want to bring about change.

I wish you well in your deliberations over the next few days. You should have a most interesting time.

I have much pleasure in declaring the Forum open.

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