

ADDRESS BY
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ON THE OCCASION OF
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GRAND HYATT HOTEL, MELBOURNE
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I acknowledge the traditional keepers of the land on which we gather this morning, and thank you for your very warm welcome.

My friends, I'm so delighted to join you for this forum, of women and men, serious about addressing the issues that confront women in business today.

I've said for years that men have to be part of these conversations:

- . so they can be part of the solution - a shared future of gender equality, of equal opportunity and access;
- . rather than the problem - a divided history of disparity in rights and possibilities between men and women across all sectors of Australian life.

Our Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick recently observed after her listening tour around the country: "we have to recognise that our lives are so interconnected that we can't do it without really engaging men".

However the men haven't always been there for the conversations.

And so, conditions dictated that I spent a great deal of my life talking with women: in workplaces and day care centres; tribunals and out bush; boardrooms and school grounds; the United Nations and community halls.

In the last few years, and again now, the conversations have only continued, with women of extraordinary diversity: artists, writers, students, ex-servicewomen, rural businesswomen, lawyers, nurses, property consultants, sportswomen, breast cancer survivors, doctors, educators, senior executives, mayors and councillors, war widows, parliamentarians, domestic violence workers.

They are mothers, single, partnered, indigenous, migrant, Muslim, Buddhist - an exhilarating mix of what women have become as individuals, and have come to represent, in our contemporary society.

In all of these myriad exchanges, I find it endlessly interesting how women communicate. And I suspect that the men here today, do too.

There is something quite special and distinct about the way women engage with one another - so different from men alone, and indeed from men and women together.

There is an awareness of self and a ready honesty in our disclosures that allow us to move more swiftly to the heart of the matter.

A couple of years ago, I read a collection of interviews with women, published in an Australian newspaper.

They were women vastly different in background and outlook: young, ageing, and ageless; accomplished and rising; content and questioning.

Each was asked what she liked most about being a woman.

One said:

Everything. The highs and lows, the cycles and tides. I love the ability to give life, the ease with which women make and maintain friendships, and their innate urge to get to the centre of things. Our curiosity.

Others talked about our strengths and weaknesses as one: our patience, our durability, our capacity to survive under all sorts of conditions.

Another, expressed relief at having make up and a hair dryer on standby when she wakes up feeling and looking like hell.

The same woman (interestingly, a former editor-in-chief of *Cosmo*, *Cleo* and *Dolly*) was, nonetheless, adamant about working with what we've got, being grateful, and getting on with it, whatever that might be.

But equally, I am intrigued, by what Margaret Atwood describes as "our collective uneasiness".

In the late 90s, she wrote an introductory piece for a compilation of interviews with women writers, published by the Paris Review.

She spoke of an all-women panel she'd been on. A member of the audience asked her how she felt about that:

We all prevaricated [she said].

Some of us protested that we had been on lots of panels that included men; others said that most panels were male, with a woman dotted here and there for decorative effect, like parsley.

Of women writers, Atwood observed that no one

wants to be overlooked or undervalued for being a woman; but few, it seems, wish to be defined solely by gender, or constrained by loyalties to it alone.

A simple enough observation - and one that needn't be limited to women writers - but I think we'd find that even in this room today it would prompt a many-layered response, many shades of allegiance.

Some of us may be puzzled or enraged by its seeming departure from the central feminist cause.

With others, it may sit quite comfortably.

And there are others who would wholly reject the label and notion of feminism 70s-style. It is this view that appears to be gaining ground.

Many of you will be familiar with Hugh Mackay who last year released his book, *Advance Australia…Where?*

Hugh is widely recognised as one of Australia's most highly respected and published social researchers, having studied the attitudes, behaviours and trends of the Australian community for some decades.

I've long been his fan and friend. In the 80s I often drew on his reports for my work as Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner.

His descriptions of the reality of women's lives in those years touched the hearts and nerves of many, as we juggled on a tightrope, balancing countless bits.

In lots of ways, what Mackay described of the "new women" of the 90s was fairly closely connected to the efforts of the women's movement of the 70s - the feminists, the radicals, the moderates, and the old boilers.

But, 15 years on, Mackay reports that the female milieu has changed considerably (among a great deal else).

Here's what he says:

. Ask any woman under the age of 30, and she's likely to tell you she isn't a feminist:

She doesn't like the label; she doesn't identify with it.

How could their mothers have got it so wrong? she asks.

They became slaves to their own "so-called liberation thinking" that they could have it all at once, when, all it produced, in her view, was a burnt-out supermum, albeit a financially independent one.

Mackay goes on:

. Liberation to young women now means being free to be whoever and whatever they want to be; to be different kinds of women, at different stages of life.

We can do anything, they say, and we want it all, but we're not crazy enough to try to have it all at once.

. Today, those women who have chosen to combine paid work with motherhood, do so more confidently and with less guilt:

partly because it seems more normal now;

partly because they find part-time options that are more manageable;

and partly because men - their partners - are expected to take more responsibility for the care of the children.

. Mackay says however that, on the whole, Australian business has failed to grasp what the revolution is about, and to understand what women (and men) as parents, and as individuals, want and need from work.

Indeed, as the rising generation enters the labour market, the push for more flexibility in working arrangements and better balance between work, family, and leisure is unlikely to be confined to women.

. And for men, it's all about being genuine. Gone is the flash of the Sensitive New Age Guys (the SNAGs) who wanted to be pregnant to know what it really felt like. It's more than okay now to be a bloke, as long as you understand the real point about the gender revolution: men and women, for all their obvious differences, are equal.

These are the voices of Australian men and women. The issues go to the very heart of who we are.

It's a reminder to us - as women, and men, who spend a good deal of time talking to women, many of whom are younger women - that:

. the mix and the emphasis are shifting;

. stereotypes are, as they've always been, misleading and unhelpful;

. and we must always be prepared for those women who defy the categories into which we've corralled them, women who emerge from surprising places: law firms; coal mines; aboriginal communities; and places beyond our lived experience.

My friends, I have another reflection, indeed a confession.

When we talk about the achievements of women, and their gains in rights, freedoms and opportunities, we so often draw on examples of the early suffragists and campaigners, the first university graduates and professionals, the trailblazers.

We need as well, I think, to start talking of the women in our midst, and drawing on their contemporary example, so that we may begin to address the issues of the new gender revolution that Hugh Mackay speaks of.

As we acknowledge women's differences, we must see too the richness and intelligence they bring to our workplaces, our parliaments, our communities, our families, and our global existence.

It's interesting to note two things about the current demise of the world's banking and financial systems.

Firstly, the absence of women's voices from the incessant talk; and secondly, the rare observation of their silence - the sort of silence that years ago provoked Judy Horacek to get women roaring through her drawings.

I did however stumble over these droplets recently in a New Statesman article called "The Missing Women":

. the author reported the suggestion of an English male journalist: that we should feminise the city in order to avoid another catastrophe;

. and he himself had quoted a female psychologist who said: "the problem with finance is that there's too much thrusting individualism and not enough femininity - a lot of women avoid management positions because they don't want to deny 50% of their personalities"!

I shall leave such provocations now to make their way into your later sessions, and perhaps even a new Horacek cartoon.

My friends, I am so impressed by your insistence still, 7 years after first convening, on debate that is as much about ideals and values as pragmatic responses.

I wish you the best of challenge and succour in the coming days.

It is my great pleasure to declare open the 2008 Serious Women's Business Conference.