

“Ambition is not a dirty word”
Speech delivered at the Women Lawyer’s Association International Women’s
Day Breakfast
3 March 2022

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respects to their elders—past, present, and emerging. I acknowledge that sovereignty over this land was never ceded.

I also acknowledge all Indigenous women and other women of colour who are present today. You are at the forefront of the change in the legal profession that needs to occur over the next decade.

At a speech that I gave in May 2014,¹ I bemoaned the fact that:

for more than 20 years, women have comprised more than half our law graduates [now making up] 63% of law graduates.² But they are not equally represented in the senior ranks of lawyers.³

Since 2014, the representation of women in law has trended upwards, and now a majority, 53%, of Australian solicitors are women, and that is true across all jurisdictions.⁴ In the ACT, 60% of solicitors are women.⁵

This gathering provides us with an opportunity to reflect on how some women achieve outstanding success in their chosen field, be it law or another field.

It seems to me that two factors may contribute to success. And I’m not referring to nepotism and good luck.

The first is a strong vocation for the work.

The career of Dame Roma Mitchell illustrates the relationship between strong vocation and success in one’s chosen field.

Vocation and success—Dame Roma Mitchell

¹ Chief Justice Murrell, ‘Women in the Law: The Bench, the Bar and the Profession’ (Speech, Law Week Dinner, 14 May 2014) 4–5.

², ‘Law: Bachelor Graduates (All)’, *Graduate Careers Australia* (Web Page, 2014) <<http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/Research/GradJobsDollars/BachelorAll/Law/index.htm>>.

³ Nor are female graduates paid as much as their male counterparts. The starting salary of male law graduates is around \$4300 higher than female law graduates, which is almost a doubling of the \$2000 disparity recorded in 2011: Graduate Careers Australia, *GradStats* (Report, December 2012) <https://www.graduatecareers.com.au/files/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/gca-gradstats-2012_final1.pdf>.

⁴ URBS, *2020 National Profile of Solicitors* (Final Report, 1 July 2021) <<https://www.lawsociety.com.au/sites/default/files/2021-07/2020%20National%20Profile%20of%20Solicitors%20-%20Final%20-%201%20July%202021.pdf>>

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⁵ Ibid.

Dame Roma Mitchell was born in 1913.⁶ As a girl, she decided to follow her father into the law. When she was unable to join the University of Adelaide Law Students' Society because she was a woman, she established the Women Law Students' Society.⁷

She was admitted to the Bar in 1934.⁸ She learned her advocacy as a junior counsel to Joe Nelligen QC, but in criminal matters she rarely appeared in court with him as jurors might be embarrassed if a woman was present when they were hearing the graphic evidence.⁹ Later in her life, Dame Roma persuaded the Premier to allow women to sit on juries.¹⁰

Much of the work offered to Dame Roma as an advocate was family law work.¹¹ She was pleased to accept such work and it developed her interest in how the law affected women, often unfairly. Nevertheless, throughout her career she was a stickler for applying the letter of the law, considering that any change should be achieved through legislative intervention.¹²

In 1962, Dame Roma became Australia's first female Queen's Counsel.¹³

In 1965, she was appointed to the Supreme Court of South Australia, the first woman to be appointed to an Australian Supreme Court.¹⁴ Former Chief Justice Len King of that Court recounted that, when she was appointed, the Chief Justice at the time Sir Mellis Napier was caught by surprise:

[Chief Justice Napier's] first reaction was to decide that all members of the court must be addressed and referred to without distinction and she must therefore be known as 'Mr Justice Mitchell'. The absurdity of this was soon pointed out to him and he thereupon directed that all members of the court be known as 'Justice' without a prefix. This eminently sensible direction seems to have been received with ill grace by at least some of the male members of the court. The direction remained in force, however, until Sir Mellis retired, where upon the male members of the court reverted to 'Mr Justice', the female member remaining as 'Justice'.¹⁵

While a sitting judge, Dame Roma continued to lecture in family law at the University of Adelaide, and she also chaired the Criminal Law and Penal Methods Reform Committee, where she advocated for reforms in the areas of sexual violence, suicide, compensation for victims of crime, the bail system and protection of the accused's rights.¹⁶

⁶ 'Dame Roma Mitchell, AC. DBE. CVO. QC', *Adelaidia* (Web Page, 2013) <<https://adelaidia.history.sa.gov.au/people/dame-roma-mitchell-ac-dbe-cvo-qc>>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Len King, 'The Judicial Career of Dame Roma Mitchell' (2000) 22 *Adelaide Law Review* 1–25, 2.

¹⁰ 'Dame Roma Mitchell' (n 6).

¹¹ King, 'The Judicial Career of Dame Roma Mitchell' (n 9).

¹² *Ibid.* 25.

¹³ 'Dame Roma Mitchell' (n 6).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ King, 'The Judicial Career of Dame Roma Mitchell' (n 9) 3.

¹⁶ 'Dame Roma Mitchell' (n 6).

Dame Roma was the first woman to be appointed as Chancellor of an Australian university.¹⁷

In what she considered to be her greatest achievement, in 1981 Dame Roma was appointed as the founding chair of the Australian Human Rights Commission.¹⁸

Throughout her career, Dame Roma was sustained by her passion for the law.

It is interesting to note that she chose her father's profession. No doubt, from childhood, she absorbed an interest in her father's occupation and came to see the law as offering a rewarding life. In this sense, she was not an exception to the rule that "you can't be what you can't see". She enjoyed her father's support. I'm sure that we all know successful men who found their feminist voice when their daughter embarked upon a career in a male dominated profession.

In any event, Dame Roma became a very visible role model for other women who were considering entry into a profession that, historically, was perceived to be too tough for those endowed with womanly attributes. Many women were inspired by Dame Roma's passion for the law.

The British software billionaire, Dame Stephanie Shirley, said:

I believe in the beauty of work when we do it properly and in humility.¹⁹

The second factor connected with career success of which I wish to speak is ambition.

Ambition and success

It is worth recalling that ambition may refer to a desire for distinction or power for oneself ("being ambitious"). It may also refer to a desired outcome ("having an ambition"). In practice, the two often go hand-in-hand. Through striving for a laudable outcome, one may gain distinction. Or one may seek a position of power in order to achieve a commendable outcome.

This next story illustrates the relationship between ambition and success.

Vanessa Nakate

Three years ago in Kampala, a 22-year-old Ugandan business graduate, Vanessa Nakate, started a one-woman campaign to save the huge Congo Basin rainforest.²⁰ She recruited a few relatives, and the Rise Up Movement grew quickly. It is now active in many African countries.²¹

¹⁷ 'Dame Roma Mitchell' (n 6).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ 'Dame Stephanie Shirley: Why do ambitious women have flat heads?', *Ted Talk* (March 2015) <https://www.ted.com/talks/dame_stephanie_shirley_why_do_ambitious_women_have_flat_heads?language=en> 12:25–12:42.

²⁰ Lerato Mogoatlhe, 'Ugandan Activist Vanessa Nakate: Why I Launched a One-Woman Protest Against Climate Change' *Global Citizen* (Web Page, 13 February 2020) <<https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/vanessa-nakate-climate-activism-in-africa/>>.

²¹ Ibid.

Her ambition is to “decolonize the climate change debate, through the inclusion of African voices”.²² She shines a light on the fact that not only has the wealthy West hijacked African resources to feed climate change but the West has also claimed the moral high ground when it comes to remedying climate change.²³

In 2020, Ms Nakate was one of a group of young climate activists who attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. The Associated Press photographed her with four young white female climate activists, including Greta Thunberg. But when the photograph was published, Ms Nakate’s black face was cropped out. She was devastated and outraged. She posted a video which elicited a huge global response. Paradoxically, the incident has greatly amplified her voice. She has said that:

You cannot have climate justice without racial justice. It isn’t justice if it doesn’t include everyone.²⁴

She has also pointed out that:

People don’t like mixing climate and, for example, race or climate and gender. But it is evident that women and girls are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis in communities like mine. ... So many times women are at the front lines when these disasters happen. It is their hard work that is put to nothing when the farms are destroyed or when their crops are destroyed. It is women who have to walk very long distances to look for water for their families in case of extreme water scarcity.²⁵

Like Dame Roma, in pursuing her vocation, Vanessa Nakate remains mindful of the need to advance women and provide a voice for them.

It has been said that there is a special place in hell for women who don’t support each other.²⁶

Let’s talk about ambition.

Ambition is a gendered concept

Ambition is a gendered concept.

²² Pamela Usai, ‘A Bigger Picture: My Fight to Bring a New African Voice to the Climate Crisis’, *Goodreads* (Web Page, 30 October 2021) <<https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/56817598-a-bigger-picture>>.

²³ Zoe Williams, “‘2.4C is a death sentence’: Vanessa Nakate’s fight for the forgotten countries of the climate crisis’ *The Guardian* (online, 13 December 2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/dec/13/24c-is-a-death-sentence-vanessa-nakates-fight-for-the-forgotten-countries-of-the-climate-crisis>>.

²⁴ Abdi Latif Dahir, ‘Erased From a Davos Photos, a Ugandan Climate Activist Is Back in the Picture’ *The New York Times* (online, 7 May 2021) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/07/world/africa/vanessa-nakate-climate-change-uganda.html>>.

²⁵ Ari Shapiro et al, ‘Uganda’s Vanessa Nakate says COP26 sidelines nations most affected by climate change’ (Web Page, 10 November 2021) <<https://www.npr.org/2021/11/10/1053943770/ugandas-vanessa-nakate-says-cop26-climate-summit-sidelines-global-south>>.

²⁶ Laura Nalesnik, ‘Clinton, Albright promote women as global leaders’ *Milford Daily News* (online, 6 June 2004) <<https://www.milforddailynews.com/story/news/2004/06/06/clinton-albright-promote-women-as/41324974007/>>.

If a man is ambitious, he is impressive, bold, and resourceful.²⁷ He is a real man, just the sort of guy you would want on your team. But an ambitious woman is a self-promoting troublemaker, and generally unlikable.²⁸ In other words, unwomanly, an affront to her gender.

In a well-known experiment by Professor Flynn of Columbia Business School, students were presented with the same case scenario, except that for the half the students the case subject was named “Heidi” and for the other half the case subject was “Howard”.²⁹ The students rated both Heidi and Howard as equally competent, but they disliked Heidi and liked Howard.³⁰ The “more assertive a student found Heidi to be, the more they rejected her”.³¹

The Pew Research Center found that the three most valued traits in men were:³²

1. Honesty/morality;
2. Professional/financial success; and
3. In an interesting pairing of success and ambition, for men the third valued trait was Ambition/leadership.

But for women the three most valued traits included neither success nor ambition. No, the most valued traits were:³³

1. Physical attractiveness;
2. Empathy/nurturing/kindness; and
3. Intelligence.

Margaret Heffernan, author, and entrepreneur, stated that:

All leaders are expected to be competent, benevolent, consistent and to demonstrate integrity.... But women also are expected to show that they care about the people working for them. To the degree that that isn't visible, they are disliked or distrusted or both.³⁴

Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Meta Platforms (formerly Facebook) said in her book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*:

Aggressive and hard-charging women violate unwritten rules about acceptable social conduct. Men are continually applauded for being ambitious

²⁷ Emma Lovell, ‘Ambition is not a dirty word: why women should change their view of ambition’ *She Defined* (Web Page, 13 February 2019) <<https://shedefined.com.au/life/ambition-is-not-a-dirty-word-why-women-should-change-their-view-of-ambition/>>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Maria Katsarou, ‘Women & the Leadership Labyrinth Howard vs Heidi’ *Leadership Psychology Institute* (Web Page) <<http://www.leadershippsychologyinstitute.com/women-the-leadership-labyrinth-howard-vs-heidi/>>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Caroline Castrillon, ‘Why Ambition Isn’t A Dirty Word for Women’ *Forbes* (Web Page, 28 July 2019) <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecastrillon/2019/07/28/why-ambition-isnt-a-dirty-word-for-women/?sh=7ca8e886e07c>>.

³² Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Renee Stepler, *On Gender Differences, No Consensus on Nature vs. Nurture* (Report, 5 December 2017) <<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/12/05/americans-see-different-expectations-for-men-and-women/>>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Castrillon, ‘Why Ambition Isn’t A Dirty Word for Women’ (n 30).

and powerful and successful, but women who display these same traits often pay a social penalty.³⁵

Australia's first woman Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala have spoken of how powerful women must walk a tightrope, balancing strength and empathy, being neither too tough (a bitch) nor too soft (lacking the backbone required by the job).³⁶

From an early age, girls learn that they shouldn't be tough and ambitious. In primary school, girls tend to outperform boys.³⁷ But from puberty they start playing down their ambitions. They don't want to be labelled "bossy", "pushy" or a "show off".³⁸

According to the Australian CGU Ambition Index, 7 in 10 women have hidden their ambition from others "for fear of being labelled a bragger".³⁹

As the recent Grace Tame incident illustrates, some people still think that, when a woman is faced with the choice of being honest or being nice, it's more important to be nice.

We hear a lot about the "ambition gap": that women are inherently less ambitious than men, that motherhood and age dampen female career goals and that women just aren't interested in leading.⁴⁰ Or, as has been suggested, there is an "ambition gap" that reflects the "F Factors" – fear and family.

In fact, research shows that there is no "ambition gap"; it is a myth.

In a large 2017 survey, the Boston Consulting Group survey found that women began their professional careers with levels of ambition that – at least – matched those of men, and their ambition was not eroded by motherhood or family status.⁴¹ However, company culture did influence ambition.⁴² Consistent with common sense, women retained their ambition if they worked in companies that had a positive work environment and valued diversity; if leadership looks achievable, ambition is fostered.⁴³ CEOs and managers can foster a positive culture in which women feel included, relaxed and able to be themselves.

³⁵ Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (W H Allen, 2015) 17.

³⁶ See Julia Gillard and Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, *Women and Leadership* (Penguin Random House Australia, 2021). See also Michael Gordon, 'Julia Gillard: On Women' *University of Melbourne* (Web Page, 27 January 2018) <<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/julia-gillard-on-women>>.

³⁷ Jennifer O'Connell, 'Ambition: Why is it still a dirty word for women?' *The Irish Times* (online, 20 October 2018) <<https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/ambition-why-is-it-still-a-dirty-word-for-women-1.3665720#:~:text=For%20women%2C%20ambition%20is%20sometimes%20seen%20as%20a%20dirty%20word.&text=If%20you're%20a%20woman,world%2C%20much%20less%20socially%20acceptable>>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lovell, 'Ambition is not a dirty word: why women should change their view of ambition' (n 27).

⁴⁰ Katie Abouzahr et al, 'Dispelling the Myths of the Gender "Ambition Gap"' *Boston Consulting Group* (Web Page, 5 April 2017) <<https://www.bcg.com/en-au/publications/2017/people-organization-leadership-change-dispelling-the-myths-of-the-gender-ambition-gap>>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

In 2015, Michelle Ryan of the University of Exeter in the UK found that, while men's ambition increased over time, that of women decreased.⁴⁴ However, the decrease was not associated with having children. Rather, it reflected subtle system biases.⁴⁵

Similarly, a 2020 American study found that there was no "ambition gap" influencing the number of women who entered politics.⁴⁶ Rather, individual, institutional and contextual gendered dynamics encouraged male candidacy and undermined female candidacy.⁴⁷

A 2021 Citizen Political Ambition Study in the United States found that, over a 20-year period, there had been no narrowing of the gender gap in political ambition.⁴⁸ In contrast to men, women still perceived themselves to be unqualified rather than qualified to run for office, possibly because it was also much less likely that a colleague had encouraged them to run.⁴⁹ They also were much less likely to have the domestic and financial support necessary to engage in political campaigning.⁵⁰

Fortunately, we can be confident that, within the ACT legal profession, ambition is not a dirty word. Our law faculties are led by women. Our courts are led by women and women are well represented on both courts. Our Law Society is led by a woman and 60% of our solicitors are women.⁵¹ At the junior bar there are many talented women who are extensively briefed. Last year, both the new silks were women. I don't think that we need to fear slippage. Women have become entrenched at all levels.

There remains the issue of sexual harassment and other inappropriate conduct within the workplace which, historically, has been focussed on younger, less powerful women. I'm sure that the senior women who are present today accept some personal responsibility to ensure that their workplace is tackling this issue.

But there is a new challenge for all of us. That is the challenge of nurturing and promoting other types of diversity in our profession. In sober contrast to the dominance of women within the ACT legal profession is the fact that, in 2020, only 0.8% of Australian solicitors were Indigenous, and Indigenous representation had not

⁴⁴ Melissa Davey, 'Women start out as ambitious as men but it erodes over time, says researcher' *The Guardian* (online, 19 November 2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/nov/19/women-start-out-as-ambitious-as-men-but-it-erodes-over-time-says-researcher>>. See further Michelle Ryan et al, 'Getting on top of the glass cliff: Reviewing a decade of evidence, explanations, and impact' 27 (2016) *The Leadership Quarterly* 446–455.

⁴⁵ Davey, 'Women start out as ambitious as men' (n 43).

⁴⁶ Jennifer M. Piscopo and Meryl Kenny, 'Rethinking the ambition gap: gender and candidate emergency in comparative perspective' 3(1) *European Journal of Politics and Gender* 3–10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jennifer L. Lawless and Richard L. Fox, 'Running for office is still for men—some data on the "Ambition Gap"' *FixGov* (Blog Post, 8 February 2022) <<https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/running-office-is-still-men-some-data-on-ambition/docview/2628092498/se-2?accountid=8330>>.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ URBS, *2020 National Profile of Solicitors* (n 4).

markedly improved since 2014.⁵² There are complex systemic reasons for this gross underrepresentation.

Knowing what we know about how, over the years, the quashing of female ambition has both affected individual women and deprived the legal profession of their talent, we have a moral responsibility to encourage ambition in everyone, not just women.

⁵² URBIS, *2020 National Profile of Solicitors* (n 4).