I acknowledge the traditional custodians.

I hail from Emerald City, the capital of the land of Oz, a place of “brightness and glory”, built of green glass, emeralds and jewels.

Former Prime Minister Paul Keating once said “if you live in Australia and you're not living in Sydney, you're camping out”.

I don’t agree. I find Canberra to be a lovely, comfortable city. We could call it Comfort City.

In the next 20 minutes I will conclusively demonstrate that, if we women remove our green-tinted glasses we will find that Emerald City is “no more green than any other city”.

I will give you the flavour of what it was like for a woman lawyer in Sydney in the late 70s when I started my legal career as a legal aid solicitor.

Until 1980 when Jane Matthews was appointed to the District Court of NSW, there were literally no women on the District or Supreme Courts of NSW.

In those days, when the only place that you could find woman judge was at a Country Women’s Association lamington
competition, I had the misfortune to appear before the District Court. It was obvious that the judge disapproved of women appearing in his court, particularly young women, particularly women solicitors. Apropos of nothing, in a courtroom packed with barristers and solicitors, he said to me:

“Young lady, I was appearing in these courts when you were still in nappies.”

He would not have made that remark to a young man. To the credit of my colleagues,– and they were all men – at the next break they gathered around to assure me that I was in the right and the judge was completely out of order.

I will return to that story later – suffice it to say it is a waste of energy to get angry when, with the passage of time, you may get even.

**Why should we advocate for equal representation of women in the legal profession?**

There are at least 5 reasons why the community needs equal representation of women at all levels of the legal profession:

1. *It is un-Australian to prevent individuals from having a fair go.* We pride ourselves on being a diverse and egalitarian society.

2. *It will strengthen our democracy.* Justice Margaret McMurdo, President of the Queensland Court of Appeal said earlier this year:
lawyers, together with an independent judiciary, play an institutional role in [democracy] ... If women are to fully embrace their democratic rights, they should be represented approximately equally with men, at the Bar and in the three branches of government, including the judiciary.¹

3. **Credibility of the profession.** If the legal profession is to be credible and representative of the community, its composition must reflect the community. Roddy Meagher, formerly of the NSW Court of Appeal once famously suggested that:

   An ideal legal profession should obviously be composed of 5% convicted criminals, 5% drug addicts, 5% dole bludgers and 30% cretans – just like the rest of the community

   I would respectfully suggest that if the percentage of women in the profession was increased there would be a corresponding decrease in the percentage of cretans (present male company excluded of course, for tonight you are honorary women).

4. **Strengthening of the profession.** The profession will struggle to maintain excellence if there is a systemic legal brain drain.² Generally, law schools admit the top 1% of secondary

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students. Half those students are women. If a significant percentage fail to progress to the top of the legal profession, then the profession will not be led by the best available minds.³

5. Return on investment. Full participation of women in the legal profession ensures a ‘return’ on the investment of legal training at university and beyond. The estimated cost of replacing a lawyer of five or more years’ seniority in the private sector is over $120,000.⁴

Women lawyers started from a low baseline in the 70s. How far have we come since then?

I want to take a brief look at three areas; the bench, the bar and the profession generally.

The Bench: Where are we now with judges?

Until the latter half of the 20th century, few women met the basic qualifications for judicial appointment; professional seniority and extensive advocacy experience.

However, for more than 20 years, women have comprised more than half our law graduates. In fact, women now make up 63% of


law graduates.\textsuperscript{5} But they are not equally represented in the senior ranks of lawyers.\textsuperscript{6}

Our male colleagues have often resisted affirmative action for women, maintaining that there will be an inevitable “trickle up” effect. But the input at the bottom has not resulted in a corresponding “trickle up”. [pause] Perhaps this is due to a flaw in male logic; as far as I’m aware the laws of gravity do not favour a “trickle up”.

On that note, let’s examine how far women have “trickled up” within the judicial arm of government.

The representation of women in the judiciary is much improved on the position in 1980, when Jane Matthews was the first woman appointed to the District or Supreme Court in NSW.

The first appointment of a woman to judicial office in the ACT was in 1993 when Magistrate Karen Fryer was appointed.\textsuperscript{7} In 2008 Justice Hilary Penfold was the first woman appointed to the ACT Supreme Court.\textsuperscript{8} In the ACT now, 50\% of judicial officers are women.

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{6}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: The 2012 GradStats Report by Graduate Careers Australia (cited in <http://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/lawyer2b/it-pays-to-be-a-male-law-grad>).


\end{flushleft}
By 2006, 21% of NSW District Court judges were women, and 13% of NSW Supreme Court judges were women. Now, 33% of NSW judicial officers are women (including magistrates).

Elsewhere, the representation of women on the bench ranges from 38% in Victoria to 28% in South Australia. Tasmania gets the wooden spoon; only 25% of Tasmanian judicial officers are women (no surprises there!).

With the exception of the ACT, the representation of women is generally much better at the lower levels of judicial office. In NSW 42% of magistrates are women but only 18% of Supreme Court judges are women. Similarly, in Victoria 43% of magistrates are women but only 26% of Supreme Court judges are women.

Nationally, Australia’s judiciary includes 338 women, or 33% of the total number of judges. While this is a significant increase from 18 years ago when 9% of judges were women, judicial gender composition across the nation is far from equal.9

In part, the improvement may be due to the introduction of more transparent selection processes, at least at a Federal level, in the ACT and in relation to the selection of magistrates in most jurisdictions.

The old “tap on the shoulder” “system” of judicial appointment is rife with opportunities for nepotism. It reminds me of another relic of the early Middle Ages (not that I was around then, lol). To avoid the indignity of handing over cash, a barrister’s fee was placed into the pocket hanging over the shoulder on the back of

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his gown; it was often referred to as a “backhander”. No need to develop that analogy ...

In 2008 the Australian government introduced a selection process that involved advertisement and interview for Federal appointments. However, it seems that this process has been abandoned recently. A one liner appearing on the Attorney-General’s Department website now states: “There are no current judicial appointment processes” for all federal courts.

We should not assume that any progress will be maintained. ??

Recently, Justice Margaret McMurdo presented a “report card” on gender equality at the Queensland bar and bench. She reported that, since coming to office about two years ago, the current Queensland government had appointed 17 judicial officers of whom all but one (Magistrate Hay) were men. She said that:

This decline in female judicial appointments is not because of any dearth of talented, experienced and in every way meritorious women candidates...

And she asked:

Could it be because of an unconscious bias by those recommending the making of appointments so that well-qualified women candidates are invisible to them and not considered?

Her Honour suggested that a judicial appointments process should be considered; that such a process may make suitably qualified women candidates more visible to the judge-makers.
One would have thought that her Honour was cautiously raising an issue that was neither new (there has been discussion and research about unconscious bias in the law since the 1980s),\textsuperscript{10} nor controversial (insofar as it makes logical sense).

One would have been wrong. Her Honour’s statement prompted the State Attorney-General to make public a private conversation with Justice McMurdo. Ironically, the ensuing media feeding frenzy largely starred men (with commentary provided by the now former Solicitor-General and a prominent Queensland barrister). And the point that Justice McMurdo had made was lost in the frenzy.

We should pause to reflect on the attitudes that underpinned the responses of both the Attorney-General and the media to what was really a statement of the obvious.

\textbf{What about the bar?}

One of the most beloved pioneer women barristers in NSW is Janet Coombs. She is both a \textit{strong and strident feminist} and a committed Catholic. From the mid-1970s she led a campaign to remove an erotic Geoffrey Proud painting that hung in the NSW Bar Association common room. It may have been adapted from a pornographic magazine photograph. In any event, it depicted a naked woman who was masturbating. In a somewhat incongruous fashion, it was hung in pride of place among pictures of male dignitaries who were fully clothed, even wigged and gowned. It

\textsuperscript{10}It was famously named by Regina Graycar and Jenny Morgan in their 1990 book, \textit{The Hidden Gender of Law}. 'The description is not about stupidity, but about the unwitting tendency of humans to see those who are like themselves and render invisible (or less relevant) those who are not': <http://theconversation.com/missing-female-judges-all-but-invisible-in-queensland-row-24904>. 
had been donated by a group of male barristers led by the abovementioned Justice Roddy Meagher. When the request for removal was refused, Janet offered to donate a companion picture of a naked male. The offer was declined on the basis that the proposed picture lacked the artistic merit of the Geoffrey Proud painting. It was not until 1994 that the offensive painting was finally removed.

Even when I was called to the bar in 1981, I was among the first 40 women ever to be admitted to the NSW Bar – I believe that I was number 37. Only a handful of those women were actually practicing. Some were academics and some had retired.

By 2006, 15% of the NSW Bar was female. Currently, women make up 20% of the NSW Bar.11

A year after the Geoffrey Proud painting was removed, in 1995 (less than 20 years ago), I was the seventh or eighth woman to be appointed silk in NSW. By way of contrast, in the last 2 years 19 women have been appointed silk in NSW.12 Women now make up 9% of NSW’s silks.13

While the ACT is leading the way in relation to the appointment of women to judicial office, we are lagging behind when it comes to

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11 New South Wales Bar Association

12 In the past 3 years 21 women have been appointed silk in NSW. In 2011, of the 98 silk applicants only 10 were women, and of the 10, only two were successful. In 2012, of the 117 silk applicants 32 were women, and of the 32 applicants, 12 were successful: Justice Rachel Ann Pepper, ’Speech on the Occasion of the 2013 New Senior Counsel Announcing Their Appointment to the Hon Justice Pepper’ (Sydney, 9 November 2012) <http://www.judiciary.nsw.gov.au/lecbasev7wr/assets/lec/m4203011711808/pepper_speech_on_the_occasion_of_the_2012_new_senior_counsel.pdf>.

13 NSW Bar Association, <http://find-a-barrister.nswbar.asn.au/search?gender=F&seniorCounsel=true>. Judge, by using the advanced search function on the NSW Bar Association website, I could search all barristers by gender and Queen/ Senior Counsel, which is how I got these figures.
the number of women at the Bar and the number of those women who are silk.

Of the 73 barristers who hold ACT practicing certificates, 9 are women (12.3%).

14 silks hold an ACT practicing certificate; 1 is a woman (6%). In the past 10 years, 9 silks have been appointed; only one has been a woman.

**Even Queensland is faring better;** 22% of Queensland barristers are women and 9% of silks are women.

Why are there still so few women at the bar and an even lower representation of women among silk?

When it comes to practising women silk, the bench’s gain is often the bar’s loss.\(^\text{14}\) It may be very difficult for women at the bar to decline a judicial appointment; it is a privilege that offers a much more regular lifestyle than does the bar.

The National Attrition and Re-engagement Study (NARS) Report released on 14 March 2014 says that, compared to women lawyers working elsewhere, female barristers are twice as likely to experience sexual harassment at their workplace. They are also more likely to experience bullying or intimidation, and discrimination due to family/carer responsibilities.\(^\text{15}\)

But discrimination is not the only reason women struggle at the Bar. The bottom line is that women don’t get briefed; they are not


given the same opportunities have trouble getting briefs. There is unseen systemic discrimination against women barristers.

The 2006 Australian Women Lawyers national *Gender Appearance Survey* revealed that women advocates in the law, the “speaking” side, receive disproportionately less court work and, in all likelihood, receive less important court work than do their male counterparts.\(^{16}\)

The Law Council of Australia 2009 Court Appearance Survey painted a similar picture.\(^{17}\)

**What of women in the profession generally?**

The 2014 NARS Report shows that women are leaving the profession in droves and that discrimination is rife.

- Half of all women report discrimination due to their gender, compared with 1 in 10 men

- One in four women had experienced sexual harassment in their workplace.

- One in four women said they had been discriminated against due to family or carer responsibilities.

- 50% of women and more than one in three men reported having been bullied or intimidated in their current workplace.

\(^{16}\) Figures from Australian Women Lawyers, *Gender Appearance Survey Information*, 2006 indicates that the total number of appearances in combined surveys of women presenting in court - 19.2% of women, compared to 80.8% of men: [http://assets.justice.vic.gov.au/scv/resources/0d71fe1b-a337-4e08-be6f-5e0b3de88c/speech06_vicwomenlawyers10thanniversary.pdf](http://assets.justice.vic.gov.au/scv/resources/0d71fe1b-a337-4e08-be6f-5e0b3de88c/speech06_vicwomenlawyers10thanniversary.pdf)

When the NARS Report was released, Fiona McLeod SC, Vice President of the Australian Bar Association, and former Chair of the Victorian Bar, described female attrition as a symptom of a profession that still caters to men:  

“Our problem is not with women, they are just the canaries in the coal mine; our problem is with the profession and the fact that we’re still operating basically as a men’s only club where some women get let in on a case-by-case basis,”

Why in 2014 are women still the “canaries in the coal mine”, the first casualties of the systemic problems with the legal profession?

Of course the “problem” is not confined to the legal profession and it is not confined to Australia.

For example, the percentage of Australian women judges is similar to that in the United States, where about 33% of state and federal court judges are female. In the United Kingdom, 22.5% of the judges in the ordinary courts are women. However, the numbers diminish as one ascends up the judicial hierarchy and in the Supreme Court there is only one woman, Lady Hale.

Women’s overall level of representation in Australian parliaments in 2012 was only 30%. Currently, we have one woman in Cabinet,

18 “Fiona McLeod SC... described female attrition as a symptom of a profession that still caters to men ahead of the release of the National Attrition and Re-engagement Study (NARS), which will be launched in Canberra today (14 March). “Our problem is not with women, they are just the canaries in the coal mine; our problem is with the profession and the fact that we're still operating basically as a men's only club where some women get let in on a case-by-case basis,” said McLeod, an executive member of the LCA.”; http://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/news/law-is-failing-and-hurting-women

and only five women in the Ministry (17%).[2] Just like the Bar, just like the Bench, women occupy the lower levels.

One of the main reasons that women are poorly represented in the profession is their inability to tolerate or refusal to accept the culture of the legal profession. The profession tolerates bullying and harassment, particularly of junior lawyers. It is competitive and profit-driven. Many women do not value “winning” highly and they did not study law primarily to achieve material success. Inevitably, the culture of the legal profession reflects that of broader society, which is market-driven and where success is measured in financial terms.

Many women agree with the 1970s feminist badge that proclaimed:

Any woman who wants equality with men has a low level of ambition. It’s not just the legal profession that is problematic, it’s the “whole system”.

Anne-Marie Slaughter argues that the representation of women in leadership positions is only half the measure of female equality; the other half is valuing family life. “If family comes first, then work does not come second”.

So when we women of a certain age ask “Why over our professional lifetimes have women lawyers failed to achieve equality with their male counterparts?” are we asking the right


question? Do we even want an “equality” that is defined in male terms?

**What can we do?**

Changing the “whole system” sounds ambitious, even for lawyers. But practising lawyers are problem solvers. Rather than pondering “Why is it so?” we prefer to ask “What can we personally do about it?”

Here are a few practical things that you might like to think about.

1. *Mentor your women colleagues*

   When Mary Gaudron commenced practice as a barrister in 1968, she had difficulty obtaining chambers because she was a woman. Janet Coombs offered to share her chambers with the future High Court judge (who was also the first woman to be appointed silk in NSW).

   In the 1970s, Janet Coombs (with the support of all members of chambers) established the Women’s Room in Frederick Jordan Chambers. The Room provided accommodation for women barristers in their first year at the bar. This room helped launch the careers of many women, including Justice Virginia Bell of the High Court and Justice Elizabeth Fullerton of the NSW Supreme Court.

   Life at the Bar can be competitive and isolated; if the profession is a coal mine then women barristers are the canaries at the lowest level of the mine. They need mentoring. Senior women barristers
are in the best position to provide mentoring but senior male barristers also have an important role to play.

The same observations apply to other parts of the profession; women need to be mentored, and the mentoring doesn’t have to come from other women.

Men can be feminists too.

2. Support affirmative action in briefing, including briefing quotas

What goes around comes around. Just as Mary Gaudron was supported by Janet Coombs, she herself became a great champion of women barristers. As NSW Solicitor-General from 1981 to 1987, she demanded that the State government deliver a healthy quota of briefs to women barristers, providing me and many others with the only quality briefs that came our way in the early days, and starting a convention that continues.21

All practitioners need to review their briefing policy and ask: Is there a woman at the bar who could do just as good a job? And if the answer that question is “I don’t know” then you should find out. Consider imposing a quota; that one in two or even one in four or one in 10 briefs will go to a woman. Ensure that the briefs that do go to women are not just “girly” briefs.

Has your firm adopted the Equal Opportunity Briefing Policy, which has been formulated for voluntary adoption by clients and legal practitioners throughout Australia? The Policy requires that,

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21In February 1981, Mary Gaudron was appointed NSW Solicitor General. She was the first woman to occupy that office in any Australian state. Shortly afterwards, she was appointed NSW’s first female QC. She held the position of Solicitor General from 1981-87: p 293.
when selecting counsel, all reasonable endeavours are made to identify and genuinely consider engaging female counsel.

3. *Speak out against bullying and harassment in the workplace and support others who speak out.* There are laws, you know.

4. *Women, take a risk*

We may not live in Emerald City but we do live in Comfort City (that was up to 7.30 last night, perhaps soon to be Ghost City). In Comfort City, we are not used to hardship or unfairness. The bar is tough and unfair. There is no guarantee that you will succeed. But you should consider taking the risk.

**Conclusion**

I return to my story about the District Court Judge who thought that I should progress in a fairly direct line from wearing nappies to changing them. About 20 years after he belittled me in court, I was serving my early days as a judge of the District Court. By that stage the judge had retired from the bench (under a cloud) and returned to the Bar. I took great pleasure in extending courtesy to him when he appeared before me to plead for mercy on behalf of his client.

There is also much to get excited about, especially from where I sit (no pun intended). Later this month, for the first time, three women will sit as the Court of Appeal.
In the mean time, remember that there will only be true equality, when women don’t have to be “honorary men”; when there are just as many dopey women at the Bar and at the bench as there are dopey men at the Bar and Bench. And let’s not kid ourselves, there are plenty of them.

Chapters

1. On the Bench
2. At the Bar

3. Women in Practice

Issues (inextricably linked)

1. Institutional and structural barriers within legal practice that operate against women and their rise to the top.\textsuperscript{22}

2. Work practices highlighted as the key to enabling women lawyers to rise to the top

3. Barriers to flexible work practices are work place culture and mindset\textsuperscript{23}
