

Speech – International Women’s Day, 2009

Melbourne Girls’ College

Thank you for your invitation to join you this evening in celebration of International Women’s Day.

It was in **1908**, just over 100 years ago, when women initiated the first Women’s Day, with 15,000 women marching through New York City. This was a time, when women were spurred through oppression and inequality to become more active in campaigning for change. However it was not until 1975, which the United Nations named as International Women’s Year, that countries throughout the world commenced celebrating 8 March as International Women’s Day.

While I usually do not place emphasis on a person’s gender in my business life, I acknowledge that in large part, I have been asked to speak this evening because I am a woman. A fact I enjoy.

I believe there are innate differences between men and women. However that said, I also believe that we should set our own definition of what it is to be a woman – neither accepting what those who fear us or who are fearful for us, determine, nor feeling resentment about limits – sometimes real but often imagined – which some people try to impose on us.

The great French writer, Simone de Beauvoir, was considered the prime feminist. However, I have always been struck by how such an intelligent, independent person as de Beauvoir so often pushed her own life and work aside so that she could more fully support her companion, Jean Paul Sartre. She undoubtedly had a rich fulfilling life but she balanced her own need for personal success with what I believe was her innate need as a woman to nurture and support.

It is not my custom to talk about myself but I have been asked to give you an idea of how I have approached my career.

Since the age of 16, I have worked mainly with men. I was the only girl undertaking a full science course, in my final year, at a co-educational school and later I was one of 5 girls in a class with 200 boys majoring in physics at Melbourne University.

My working career was not planned.

I commenced work as a computer consultant with Honeywell – one of 2 women. I then became Senior Economic Analyst at Hamersley Iron – a subsidiary of Rio Tinto. I was the first and only woman ever employed by the company, above clerical level and this required a decision by the Board. I was listed as a de facto male not to set a precedent.

During my time with Hamersley Iron, I completed a Master of Business Administration, the 5th woman in Australia to do so. My mentor, who was the 3rd woman to gain an MBA and a great role model for me, was later the first Australian woman to become a Supreme Court Judge.

It was then, only six years into my business life, that I hit the glass ceiling. I wished to move into Marketing but it was felt by management that it would not be appropriate for a young woman to sell iron ore to the Steel Mill owners in

Europe and Japan. As a result, I was offered senior positions in Human Resources or Public Relations but decided to move on.

I spent a year in Greece working for a major shipping company in their chartering department and then returning to Australia, became Head of Marketing at Jetset, a major travel company.

It was at this stage, that I decided that I wanted to be in general management – particularly a position associated with bringing about change.

I had moved where my interests or opportunities took me, but without realising it, in doing so, had developed a solid basis for general management.

While at Jetset, I was approached to move into a Government position, and became a General Manager in Public Transport, setting up the first marketing department for the train, tram and bus services in Melbourne. After a few years, I left this position returning to the commercial world as Business Manager of a Law Firm.

While there I was approached to go into local government where I became CEO of Glen Eira. It was the time of amalgamation of councils and Glen Eira was made up of Caulfield and Moorabbin, with 1500 employees. There was massive change required.

From there I moved into Save the Children where I was CEO of Save the Children Australia and a Director on the International Save the Children Board. Here again, there were major changes required. There were 7 Save the Children organisations in Australia, each with their own Board and the organisation was on the verge of bankruptcy. Organisations had to be amalgamated and the financial situation turned around.

I left Save the Children late last year and I am now in a new position as CEO of Marriott Services and still on a learning curve.

I realise how fortunate I have been to be a woman in Australia. There are endless opportunities for women here.

But women world-wide are a powerful force and no more so than in third world countries, despite massive discrimination in some areas.

As CEO of Save the Children I visited many countries and met women and children in some of the poorest areas of the world, where no tourist goes. It is inspiring to meet women who have so little but with the drive and energy to fight to fulfil their dreams. Usually, it is simply the opportunity they require.

One of the places I visited several times was Bangladesh where Save the Children Australia works in a brothel. This brothel has 2000 people living in it, just on 1000 of these being children. The brothel is made up of rows and rows of corrugated iron sheds, each about 3m by 3m – barely larger than the size of a double bed. The women and their children live in this shed, with the younger children staying there even when the woman is seeing a client.

Between the sheds, there are dirt tracks, running with sewage, and with the torrential rains that come in this area, they are often just churned up mud. Until Save the Children commenced working there, there were no cooking facilities, washing facilities or latrines. If sex workers moved outside the brothel, it was a government requirement that they should not wear shoes to indicate to others

that they were a sex worker. By law, their children were not allowed to attend the village school, which meant that they had no future. I met people who were third generation in the brothel – grandmother, mother and now daughter working as sex workers.

Twelve years ago, 3 girls only 8 years of age, ran away from the brothel and asked for help as they were afraid they could be forced to become sex workers. One can only imagine the fear they felt because they approached men for this help and could have been abused by them rather than given help.

Since then, Save the Children has built a Safe House just near the brothel, where girls who reach puberty, can live. Their mothers can visit them and they can visit the brothel. We built a primary school for the children of the brothel and this has become the village school and students are made up of 50% brothel children and 50% village children. Now on completion of primary education at this school, brothel children attend the village secondary school.

The sex workers now have a union and are advocating on their own behalf. Some are now training others in hygiene and how to guard against sexually transmitted diseases. They're wearing shoes, visiting village women in their homes, running their own community bank, many are undertaking literacy classes – before this none of them could read or write, running their own pre-school centre and many of them are supporting their children in their desire not to move back into the brothel. One of the sex workers is even planning to stand for government.

Of the 3 girls who ran away and in effect, started this movement, one has moved out of the area and is living with her extended family, one has become a sex worker but one has just completed a University course and is a paramedic. She is now working in the hospital which Save the Children has built near the brothel, to be close to her mother and sister who are still there as sex workers.

Children from the brothel are now fulfilling some of their ambitions such as attending secondary school and many are working towards going to University.

There are so many instances of women who, given the opportunity, are redefining and taking greater control of their own lives and those of their children. We can learn from such women who have stepped outside their comfort zones and taken up the opportunities on offer.

Many of you have yet to embark on your careers. You will no doubt have many opportunities, but remember that life is about living. Many people talk of work/life balance. However, my view is that life is not about rigid allocation of time, it's about being involved in all aspects of life. So I simply say 'get a life' and the balance will take care of itself. Open yourself up to different experiences, however challenging they may seem. This is how we grow the most.

As Sartre, de Beauvoir's companion said:

'Life is nothing until it is lived, but it is yours to make sense of'

So as we remember the past achievements of women, often in extraordinary circumstances, may we continue to develop the value and sense in our own lives as part of our own definition of what it is to be a woman.

