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Former High Court judge stands up for gender equality

The Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG called for strong commitment to gender equality within the legal profession at the second annual Margaret Nyland Long Lunch on Friday.

Mr Kirby said that while female representation in senior ranks of the profession was increasing, there was still room for improvement.

The former High Court judge was the guest speaker at the lunch, which was established to celebrate and advance the cause of women in the law.

The event, hosted by the Law Society of SA and the Women's Lawyers Association of SA, was named in honour of The Hon Margaret Nyland AM, the second woman in SA – and fourth in Australia – to be appointed to the Supreme Court bench.

In his speech to the 300 attendees, Mr Kirby noted the discrepancy between the number of practising female lawyers and the comparatively small number of women in positions of seniority.

"The number [of women in Australia] who wield the legal power as partners, or as sole practitioners, or as members of the bar, is 23 per cent," he said.

"If it is the case that 55 per cent of graduates are women, the notion that the power belongs to only 23 per cent is really old hat and there needs to be a change - not just in numbers but the facilities and provisions which make the improvement in those numbers possible.

"Training a lawyer to high levels of knowledge and skill has a high economic and social cost. To the extent that the talents of 55 per cent of the qualified Australian legal workforce were not being fully utilised, lifelong, this should concern all judges, advocates and other legal professionals - not just economists.

"True equal opportunity in the law is not only a moral and individual objective. It is an economic imperative."

Mr Kirby was optimistic about the future of women in the legal profession, and said the composition of the High Court Bench, of which three of the seven judges are women, was a "sign of encouragement".

He said there were only six women among the 110 law students when he was at university, whereas today female law students outnumber males.

Mr Kirby also paid warm tribute to Ms Nyland, and reminisced on how he would always use Ms Nyland's chambers when the High Court sat in Adelaide because he "picked up good vibes" - and indeed, inspiration - from the fact that they were once the chambers of Australia's first Supreme Court judge Dame Roma Mitchell.

Ms Nyland, who is the patron of the Women's Lawyers Association, was the Master of Ceremonies at the lunch, held at the Sebel Playford Ballroom.

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