

Key note Speech - Women in Law Awards 2013

Given by AWL President - Amy Challans

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Ladies and gentleman and distinguished guests I am absolutely delighted, as President of AWL to have been asked by Lawyers Weekly to give tonight's key note address and to play an important role in recognising the talents of our profession's female practitioners.

I wish all the nominees the very best and congratulate them on their achievements and contribution to the legal profession.

PAUSE

"Women are the largest untapped talent in the world". This statement is extremely true but who is the author? Does anyone know?

Hilary Clinton, female, former lawyer, US senator and US Secretary of State

I was inspired to shape my key note address around Hilary's quote as it

- drives much of the work that AWL does in advocating for the recognition and promotion of women in the legal profession AND
- reflects the importance of tonight's Awards in recognising and promoting the talents of women across all jurisdictions and practice areas of the legal profession.

In the context of Hilary Clinton's statement, can it truly be said that the Australian legal profession is tapping into its reservoir of female talent?

Upon examination of current statistics relating to women in the law it is clear that the Australian legal profession still has a long way to go.

Research conducted by AWL shows that in 2012 only 7.91% of women practise as senior counsel at the independent bar (64/808 people) and in 2013 only 33.53% of judicial positions in Australia are currently occupied by women (340/1014 people).

Other research conducted by the Australian newspaper shows that only 19% of Australian barristers are female and 17.1% of women are equity partners in Australia's leading firms.

Sadly, these figures exist despite women constituting more than 60% of all law graduates since 2001, more female than male solicitors being admitted to practise in the last 12 years and female solicitors out numbering male solicitors for the first 10 years of practise.

This disparity is also reflected more broadly in the corporate sector with the October 2013 figures from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency showing that within Australia's top 200 companies:

- 3% of women chair the Boards of those companies
- 12.3% hold Board directorships
- 3.5% have a female CEO and
- 9.7% have female Executives

In light of these figures what strategy can be adopted to untap the reservoir of female talent within Australia's legal profession?

I believe that one key strategy lies in the hands of women themselves, using their individual and collective power to be agents of change. This requires women to be proactive in recognising their own power and harnessing that power to untap their talent and the talent of other women.

As previously stated with 60% of law graduates being female, more female than male solicitors being admitted over the last 12 years and women out numbering male practitioners for the first 10 years of practise NOW represent an ideal time for women to use their numbers to SUPPORT and PROMOTE each other and untap their own reservoir.

To achieve this, women first need to acknowledge that:

- They CAN generate the power to bring about change
- Power can be exercised IRRESPECTIVE of age, seniority, experience
- Change WON'T occur without women taking the lead

Furthermore women need to be COMMITTED to exercising this power and being agents of change for other women.

To quote Barrack Obama *“Change will not come if we wait for some other time. We are the one we have been waiting for”*. This statement is very true. Women need to be change that they envision. They need to take leadership responsibility for generating the momentum for change. Or who else will?

How can this be done? And what does it involve?

To generate power at the individual level I believe that women first need to ask THEMSELVES “What are YOU doing to untap your OWN talent?” “What steps are YOU taking?”

- Are you applying for senior roles?
- Are nominating to be on Boards and Committees?
- Are you nominating to be on the Law Society council/executive
- Are you marketing yourself?
- Do you have a career plan?
- Are you meeting with the right people?
- Do you actively network?
- Have you an established network list?
- Do you keep in regular contact with your networks?
- Do you have a mentor?
- Do you have a coach?

OR

- Are you waiting for someone else to untap your talent?
- Are you waiting for one else to champion you?

Too often women hope that someone will see their talent without actively putting it out there to be seen. In the first instance, by doing this, we are our own WORST enemies. If NOBODY knows about you, if NOBODY knows you exist, HOW will you be seen? HOW will your talents be untapped?

The second question I believe that women need to ask is

- What LEADERSHIP role am I taking to unearth, support and promote women's talent in the profession?
- What STEPS am I taking to untap the reservoir of female talent?
- HOW am I supporting and promoting the talents of women?
- Am I part of the problem? Or part of the solution?

Do you actively:

- Circulate and promote the achievements of your female colleagues to other colleagues and clients
- Nominate female colleagues for Awards or for public recognition
- Brief female barristers
- Put female talent in touch with clients and colleagues to explore potential opportunities
- Encourage and support female talent to apply for senior roles
- Recruit female practitioners
- Are you a referee for a female practitioner
- Do you mentor female practitioners?
- Are proactive in creating a supportive environment for female colleagues/practitioners in the workplace - establish networking/discussion groups?
- Vote for female candidates nominated for Law Society Council/executive
- Refer female practitioners who are standing for positions to your colleagues and clients for consideration and support
- Participate in survey's and study's relevant and have impact upon women in the profession

The power that women can generate at the local level as individuals should not be ignored. It is about taking leadership and ownership.

In addition to exercising power at the individual level I strongly believe that harnessing COLLECTIVE power is essential for generating change.

As President of AWL, the peak national body responsible for representing female lawyer Associations in each State and Territory of Australia, I am a STRONG advocate for women coming together and exercising their power as a collective group.

Indeed the objects of AWL to:

- Advance EQUALITY for all women in the legal profession
- Create and enhance awareness of women's CONTRIBUTION to the practice and development of law and
- provide a professional and social NETWORK for women lawyers

provide a platform for women's talents to be untapped and promoted at the State and National level.

So what does this exercise of collective power require from women?

It requires women to:

- Become a member of a collective group/organisation
- Raise issues for consideration and lobbying

- Volunteer their time
- Lend their knowledge and/or expertise
- Nominate to be on the management committee
- Nominate for leadership positions

The BENEFITS of women harnessing their collective power can be reflected in the gains that AWL and its State and Territory Associations have achieved since their establishment. These gains include:

- Direct personal consultation with State/Territory Supreme Court justices regarding the appointment of silk
- Consultation by the majority of State/Territory Attorney Generals' regarding State judicial appointments
- Consultation by the Commonwealth Attorney General regarding appointments to all federal jurisdictions including appointment to the High Court Australia

But the advances of collective power through organisations such as AWL require continued participation by women to firmly establish ongoing change. As the statistics clearly show, there is still much to do.

One of the key benefits of women harnessing their power and being agents of change is that it inspires other women.

Which brings us to tonight's Awards.

These Awards are particularly important as they recognise Agents of change that have exercised leadership and inspired others. In PARTICULAR, I would like to acknowledge the:

The Jacinta Fish Mentor Award that acknowledges the recipients commitment to the development of female talent in their organisation;

Future Star Award that recognises the best young in house and private practice female lawyers in Australia; and the

The Lasting Legacy Award that recognises the recipient's leadership in challenging, influencing and changing the practice of law in Australia for the betterment of female lawyers.

Ladies and gentlemen in short, by women using their individual and collective power to be agents of change there is much that women can do to create an environment that supports the genuine recognition, advancement and promotion of talent.

However it is ONLY by women collectively recognising that they have the power and being committed to exercising that power that the process of untapping their reservoir of talent will generate genuine momentum.

In short, women need to be the change they envision.

If I could exercise any of my own individual power and inspire you to do ONE thing when you return to work on Monday:

- Brief a female Barrister

- Become a mentor to female practitioners
- Nominate to be on a Board or committee
- Support your female colleagues nomination to be on a Board or committee
- Circulate that nomination to your colleagues and personally refer that candidate to them
- Nominate your female colleague for an Award or public recognition
- Be a referee for a female practitioner
- Recommend a female practitioner to friend, colleague or client
- Organise for your employer to become a corporate member of a State/Territory Women Lawyer Association
- Get your female colleagues together and start a networking information sharing group
- Join your local State and Territory Women Lawyer Association
- If you are a member, nominate to be on the management committee

In the words of Sonia Ghandi (President of the Indian National Congress Party, and ranked by Forbes Magazine as the 3rd most powerful woman and 9th most powerful person on the planet) *“Women through their own initiative, their energy and enterprise, through individual and collective action, can transform not only their own situations but the broader social context itself”.*