

Chapter 11

Ready for Brilliant Careers, Oblivious to Inequality

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I come from a highly academic single-sex school. We pride ourselves on achievement, on excellence in all fields and we are told most weeks at assembly that we will be the generation of women that will change things once and for all. We will break that glass ceiling. We will make a difference.

A series of successful and influential women stand on our stage and explain to us how wonderful we are. We are intelligent, talented and ambitious and our expectations for the future have no bounds. Indeed one could easily say our work expectations are based not in reality but in fantasy. If you look at my biography in the program you'll see the breadth of my personal ambition – writer, director, politician, historian. I could probably add a few more on quite easily: model, prime minister, editor of *Time*.

My concern about the young women I see around me every day, each of us soon to finish year 12 and make our university choices, is that we are little educated as to the ways of the working world.

Having been told regularly for six years that we can do anything, I fear that perhaps we have been somewhat spoiled, indulged, given levels of confidence which make us assume that the future will be easy. When I asked girls from my year about their work expectations I generally received blank looks. Some quickly told me their uni degree choices: I'm going to do medicine at Sydney; law at New South Wales. What about after that? I'll get a job. What kind of job? A good one.

We have many idealised views of office life from television. Ally McBeal flirting with co counsel. The cast of *Seinfeld* stealing from their bosses. In *Desperate Housewives* we have Edie directing a construction site in high heels and a mini skirt. It all looks pretty fun. And noone seems to do very much actual work.

Great Expectations

My generation expects to, straight after uni, fall into wonderfully fulfilling, meaningful and prosperous careers. We give little thought as to how this will be done – we are young women, we are equal, we can do anything.

I cannot speak for all young women here but, I suspect, that the situation is the same across much of the education system, public and private. Girls are told we will achieve, and overwhelmingly at school level we do. We beat boys in the Higher School Certificate year after year, we do debating, rowing, netball, mock trials, we give speeches, we perform and we study.

Yet there are many young women I have met, at many different schools, who I can't imagine would be able to effectively present their skills at a job interview. We know nothing about networking, about differentiating ourselves from the masses of other highly qualified young people. This has, I'm sure, always been true of the young. The idea is once you make it to the workplace you'll learn or you won't survive. Many of you probably gained this type of practical intelligence quickly or you wouldn't be here now. And of course, we will manage. Just as all those before us have, I'm sure within a few years of entering the workplace we'll have overcome hurdles and many will have begun to rise.

Little Knowledge of the Workplace

But I fear that my generation's knowledge of the workplace is severely lacking, and our expectations for the future match this gap. When I asked girls about what they thought would make a good employer a common response was that they assumed that within a few years they wouldn't have one – they would run their own business, have their own employees. Others said someone nice, someone who respected them, who gave them pay rises regularly and most importantly, was fair. The majority said they'd never thought about it.

Now I do consider myself somewhat of a feminist. I still feel that there is much to be done in the area of women and the workplace and indeed for women in general.

These views are pretty unpopular with young women my age. Perhaps it is the rise of individualism in Australia but most of my friends see feminism as finished. More than that, they see any problems for women as having little to do with them. A declining wage for part-time workers is irrelevant to us, unless it is our mothers or sisters dealing with it. Because we don't really expect to ever do work like that beyond uni; we'll be doctors, professors, employers, not employees. Of course, we wouldn't admit that aloud.

It worries me that many young women feel no allegiance to each other. Debates or policy changes relevant to women in the workplace are ignored, or written off as feminist. We fail to see that these affect everyone.

One company bringing in extra childcare, or one minister restarting a debate on abortion, or a new set of industrial relations laws. These changes have to be examined and understood, even though they're not yet relevant to us still in high school. Whatever our individual politics, I still believe that women's affairs should be important to women, whether you're successful or not. A common view among young women

I know is that we should all look after our own problems and it's not my fault if someone else doesn't have an equal wage as long as I do.

Perhaps I'm not the best person to speak for my generation, coming as I do from a school where our expectations are so high. I can't speak for young women in rural areas, or private schools, or small ones. I can say that I have flourished under the selective single-sex system, and I see myself as having a healthy level of ambition and competitive instinct. Part of me knows that the workplace will be tough; to achieve success we will need to be prepared, hard working and in some fields probably quite ruthless.

Imagining myself as a politician I do understand how much would be required of a woman who was truly influential. But deep down, my generation expects success. We expect money, prestige and we don't expect to sacrifice our social lives. At 17, the working world doesn't seem that tough — I've studied before, I've argued my opinions, I'm not afraid of anything. But I suspect that if you put some of my very talented friends up against an older employer and asked her to negotiate a successful workplace agreement she would probably sign whatever was put in front of her without even asking about hours or sick leave.

I'm not quite informed enough about the new industrial relations reforms to talk confidently about their impact on women and my generation as we enter the workplace.

Young May Suffer From Reforms

However, when I read in the paper that Bill Mitchell, an economics professor at the University of Newcastle, said low-paid workers, women and migrants would be among the hardest hit, I worry.

These reforms may assist many Australians but I think that young people will suffer, especially at first, with the changes. I can easily imagine small-business employers having so many young men and women applying for one position that anyone who wishes to negotiate an AWA will simply move down the list. It will be easier for employers to dismiss us; it will be easier to make changes to annual leave. Those of us not yet in the workplace little understand the impact this could have. After all, why would we ever be dismissed?

I hope I'm not painting too grim a picture of my contemporaries. I see extraordinary talent in academia and even more importantly in young women acting as leaders every day at school and beyond. I recently attended the National Schools Constitutional Convention where I was heartened to hear just how many young women are informed and passionate, on all sides of politics. It's hard to imagine these women giving up anything without a fight.

Still, I do want to raise some awareness that although my generation has many work expectations, few of them

relate to being women. This could be a good thing, a sign that, perhaps, gender differences are lessening to the extent that we're not even aware of them anymore. But I don't really believe that. I think we're in for a rude awakening when we see what the workplace really is — not filled with kindly mentor types and opportunities to wear attractive little corporate outfits but a tough and demanding world. I don't know if that world is male-dominated; it probably varies widely in all fields. But I suspect that we will not be so unconcerned about female equality when faced with childcare issues, or pay equity.

According to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission women now earn 85 cents to the male dollar, which is reduced to 66 cents when part-time and casual workers, predominantly women, are factored in.

Right now, to the year 12 girls at Sydney Girls High School, this is merely another vaguely depressing fact from a magazine. Our expectation is that we will never really have to deal with anything like that — surely if I work

hard enough it will never affect me. My friends in part-time work now see it as merely a step, an unimportant step used to buy shoes and petrol. And articles in the newspaper are highly unlikely to affect our views of the future.

Rosy View Prevails

Further, we do not expect to have to choose at any point between parenthood and a career. We generally do wish to have children; we do wish to be successful and we assume we'll have the resources to afford childcare and maternity leave with ease. Until we face it ourselves, my generation is sticking with a rosy view. Around me at school I have future diplomats, barristers and CEOs. One swears she will become the first female prime minister, another that she will focus on issues of indigenous reconciliation. They are all noble and exciting dreams. Many of them will work out. Many won't.

My generation, like those directly in front of it, is not filled with many radicals or protesters. We aim for prosperity, security and success, and many young women see the Howard Government as important in insuring this. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this.

However, I do feel that young women are increasingly complacent as to women's affairs, and our place in the workplace. Unless we are prepared to demand our expectations are met, or at least those expectations that are reasonable, they will not be. And without the practical skills to help us enter and improve the workplace I fear our expectations will remain excessive and unrealistic.

My generation needs more information and practical advice as to what is needed to be a successful woman in the modern workplace. Beyond that, we need the political awareness, whatever our personal views, to

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Making the Link

understand that policies on women affect all women. We may consider ourselves above feminism. I wonder how much that will change when we enter the actual workplace and understand that deciding between medicine and economics at the end of year 12 may not be the end of the tough career moves in our future.