

Chapter 12

You Can Do Anything and Everything

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I first spoke at this conference four years ago, at the tender age of 16, and so when I sat down to write my presentation for today, I thought I'd take a look back at what I'd said in 2001. The thing that struck me the most about what I'd written was my supreme confidence. At 16 years old I'd never encountered anything to make me think that my dreams of being a thespian-astronaut-doctor would ever have any difficulty materialising.

While I could recite a long list of jobs and positions within our society where there existed (and still does exist) a staggering lack of female representation, I had little concept then of the actual impact that this has on the lives of women, and may eventually have on my life.

I was, and I think I still am, an excellent example of the "You can do anything and everything" generation. We're a great generation of women, ambitious, thoughtful, involved, modest. We were raised on the mantra of "You can do anything and everything." We were told this by our mothers, teachers, even sometimes paradoxically through popular culture (in between the photos of overly-thin models, even *Dolly* magazine espoused some girl power) and so we've graduated from high school knowing, somewhat like Superman and surf clothing, no boundaries, no limits.

Cracks Developing

But now, it seems, that while the "anything" part of our mantra may still be available, the "everything" part could have been a lie. Because we've got to 20, and suddenly it looks like we may have to make sacrifices. Is it possible that we can't save the gay whales, raise two and a quarter kids and be the chief executive officer of our own trans-national corporations all at once? As you can imagine, this is not welcome news.

Now, I am well aware that we are not the first generation of women to reach this point. That our mothers and aunts and generations of women before us have come to this place: the point where it becomes clear that sacrifices must be made.

But what makes us unique is that we are the "You can do anything and everything" generation: the generation that was born believing we had equality, were owed equality; and had the advantage of mothers who had fought good fights on our behalf. And, while cracks in the theory may be developing, we are not quite ready to let go. And this is where the workplace comes in.

Many of the limitations that we are be facing seem to

be rooted in the workplace: family versus career, saving the world versus the Darling Harbour penthouse, opportunity versus responsibility.

We need a workplace that will allow us to be everything that we have been promised, a workplace that will allow us the same opportunities as our male peers, a workplace that will allow us to achieve all that we can.

I can quote here the long list of requests, that hundreds of thousands of women before me have demanded: affordable childcare close to the workplace, equal pay, equal opportunity, maternity leave, paternity leave, retraining options, strong unions, the list goes on.

These are not issues on which every woman agrees, and I can't claim to speak for the united youth of Australia. Clearly, the only person I can speak for is myself, but, sadly, these are the kind of issues that tend to dominate the discussions I have with my female friends. So I can tell you that the opinions of the female second-year economics students at Sydney University are pretty much united on these topics.

Job for Employers

We reckon that if those issues are considered, addressed and then thoroughly fixed by employers, then it will be possible to achieve equality in the workplace. These issues are the ones that transfix young women when we are considering employment. An employer who has that sorted is likely to get a queue of bright, ambitious, hard-working women applying for any decent jobs. Some of the elements of my perfect workplace, such as a strong union protecting all employees, are under attack, and the free market ideology that our economy is currently governed by does not lend itself to these kinds of protections.

I don't think the women of my generation are looking for any form of special consideration, and issues such as affirmative action are fairly contentious among my female peers. As the graffiti says, "Equality is a myth, women are better."

We recently had affirmative action introduced to our union board, and the debate that raged around that, within the female-student community was, and is, divisive. Is fixing the selection process really the way to make social change? Are we really dealing with the root of the problem? There was little consensus on these issues. But what we are all relatively agreed on is that women, at this point in history, are still at something of a disadvantage.

Women are generally operating within a male-dominated power structure, which currently is trying hard to be flexible but may in fact not know what that

word really means. And there is, of course, the ever-present issue of family, where workplace flexibility is paramount — and that doesn't mean offering someone the chance of casual employment with no security or benefits.

Raising a family is by no means the desire of all the women I go to uni with — or even the ones who finished university 10 years ago. We can see this in the declining national birth rate. And I guarantee you it is not just a lack of Mr Pretty Goods out there. Some women don't want children.

But it is also an option that we feel shouldn't be out of reach. Many of us, myself included, have grown up feeling wholly un-maternal. The thought of three kids (or even one) is not at all an appealing one, and for me this hasn't changed. What has changed, however, is my confidence that I am right all the time.

While I still don't want kids, there is a part of me that is open to the fact that this is the kind of decision that I may regret making in later life. Between my highly maternal and marvellous mother and Virginia Haussegger, someone, somehow has convinced me, that while I may not want kids now, I might want them in 10 or 20 years time.

This is what the workplace needs to provide: the opportunity for women to have children, raise a family in whatever way they choose, and still have a fulfilling career, not some process job in a law firm, architectural practice or government office. Many of the problems that women face in this regard are rooted in society's perception of the role of mothers.

People are often shocked I'm not locked up in juvie with an "I Love Bikers" tattoo on my forehead, after having a nanny and being in childcare for the first four years of my life. My mother tells me she was often criticised for consigning her children to childcare. And yet no-one ever complained, or even commented on this to my father. The expectations of our society are difficult to combat, but, at the risk of sounding like a Howard groupie, choice is the issue here. There shouldn't be the constant guilt about not taking the first five years of your child's life off work so as to be there for them every minute of every day through to kindergarten. While being no social-studies major, it seems to me that we should be creatively supporting women who choose to have children, and not judging them for unorthodox child-rearing methods.

But ensuring equality in the workplace is the most basic requirement of the "You can do anything and everything" generation. The next key issue of women of my generation is to be really connected to our work, and not just through our pay cheque.

We are a globally aware generation, the radicals at the NSW Department of Education made sure this is so by inserting environmental education into our science syllabus, diversity into the English syllabus, and social-justice education into the history syllabus.

This has had a huge impact on the way that we view

the world. It is not the unlimited resource of our parents' day, but fragile and constantly threatened. Those inequalities that have previously been hidden are now glaringly obvious to us, and many of the women (and to be fair, men) of my generation have taken on board a certain responsibility towards the way the world operates.

Generation Committed to Change

This has manifested itself in a number of different ways among my peer group, I myself spend a ridiculous number of hours at Amnesty International (although this could be a study diversion tactic), my fashion-design student friend has developed a "Sustainability Club", to make ecologically sustainable clothing, another is on a mission to adorn every toilet door in Newtown with a rape crisis centre sticker, another teaches basketball to under-privileged kids after school, I could go on listing my fabulous friends, but I won't. What I am trying to demonstrate is that we are a generation committed to change.

These attributes are not specific to my generation, but I think it is more widespread in my generation. The group of people who are out to save the world are not an extreme minority, but the majority. I am assured we will

all grow out of it, by my ever-optimistic economics tutor, but I beg to differ. It appears to me that we are in it for the long haul.

We are looking for jobs that not only pay the rent, but also help us achieve what we see to be our global responsibilities. This means more than the option of having 20 dollars a month deducted by Greenpeace. We

want to be able to shape policy, and have control over outcomes.

This is not restricted to those of us who hope to go into politics; this is a common hope of most of my friends, future lawyers, novelists, chemists, fashion designers, economists, nurses and policewomen.

I recognise that this is the kind of power that generally comes with years of experience, and few of us are expecting to be dictating company policy just after graduating uni, but what we are expecting is companies and organisations that are open to the demands of our generation; that understand the concepts of responsibility that we have been brought up with and that are responsive to these ideas.

These are the aspects of life which at 16 I had never really thought about — but there are other areas about which I feel exactly the same way.

Being challenged in the workplace is as important as it ever was. In my brief experiences of paid employment I found the grinding repetitiveness of three months selling swimwear at David Jones dull; made worse by the way women are made to feel about their bodies. My best experiences have been tutoring, where I am free to shape my own lessons, and am constantly presented with

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different requirements. This is what makes a workplace appealing to me, different aspects to a job, challenging and ever-changing materials to work with, openness to new ideas and issues.

We want jobs that not only encourage, but require us to stay connected to our world, and remain up to date on world affairs.

We are a generation of women who are willing to give a lot, to work long hours and work hard during those hours. Stress is not something that we actively avoid, but almost the opposite. We are not the well-publicised generation of computer-game addicts, who are growing more and more obese on a strict diet of fast food. Youth has always had a bad wrap in the press, and we are no different, in that regard, to any other generation. And, like other generations we reject the labels we've been given. We're a hardworking and sharp bunch, and we are after employers who can recognise and utilise these attributes.

Statistics tell me that I'm set to have more than one type of job in my life, and this is not unappealing to me. I want to do a lot and see a lot, and have no desire to be loyal to one organisation for my entire working life. But there are things that I want to be the same no matter where I am. First and foremost is equality. Equality of treatment and of pay. The option to have a family and not be disadvantaged. It is also important to me that I'm paid what I'm worth, and am able to be sick or take a holiday without constantly worrying about the security of my job. As I've said, these are basic requirements. We also want to be challenged, to be connected to our world.

We want a workplace that will demand much of us, intellectually and emotionally. But in return we want results. We live in daunting times, the threat of a worsening environmental situation hangs constantly over our heads, widening financial inequality both nationally and internationally and the constant threat of terror and the war on terror are just some of the issues that we need to address.

We will work hard, but we want to work for what we believe in.

It will take a lot to convince us we are not the "You can do anything and everything" generation; we've been well educated. What we want from our workplace is the ability to be that generation.