

**THE TASMANIA UNIVERSITY LAW SOCIETY
WOMEN IN LAW BREAKFAST
ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
THE OLD WOOLSTORE APARTMENT HOTEL
WEDNESDAY 10 SEPTEMBER 2025**

Good morning. It is a great pleasure to speak with you today.

May I begin by acknowledging the Muwinina people who once lived in this part of our island. I acknowledge today's Tasmanian Aboriginal community as ongoing custodians of Country. I recognise their enduring culture and deep connection to land, sea, sky and waters.

I have spoken at this event twice, first in 2013, when a Judge of the Federal Circuit Court. I talked about the changes for women in the legal profession since my admission to practice, some thirty years prior. I spoke again, in 2021, soon after my appointment as Governor, when I updated women's progress in the profession.

Today, I would like to give you another update, as there have been some positive developments in recent years.

1. Women in the Profession in 2025

At my graduation ceremony in 1980, there were nine women of 39 total graduates. When I was admitted to the Supreme Court in 1983, there were no female judges or magistrates. There were very few female Principals of law firms or in senior positions in our profession.

Now, women graduates outnumber the men. Since 2016, the numbers have been predominantly female, with 56 percent in 2020.

Today, in 2025, there are three women among the seven Supreme Court Justices, two of whom are present today. We have a female Chief Magistrate and eight

female magistrates out of a total of 18; two are present. We have a female judge of the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia, our first female Solicitor-General, our first female Director of the Legal Aid Commission, a female Deputy Director of Public Prosecutions, a female Registrar of the Supreme Court, and a female Secretary of the Justice Department.

This year, we can celebrate an historic moment in Tasmanian legal history when, on 16 April, the first court of appeal, consisting of our three female justices, sat as the Court of Criminal Appeal. This was a first in the 201-year history of the Supreme Court. And it was fitting that two female barristers appeared before the Court.

It has become the norm for women to hold senior positions of authority in our legal profession, judiciary, and justice department. With each woman in a leadership position, it becomes easier for the next, as we get used to and expect this trend and idea.

In respect of practising solicitors in the profession, 57 percent are female.¹ In private practice, since 2021, there has been an increase in female Principals, of 25% to 34%.²

At the Tasmanian Independent Bar, there are eleven female barristers and 39 male barristers, an increase of two females since 2021,³ with some attrition of several females promoted to judicial positions.

So, the number of women in the profession and those achieving senior positions has improved.

2. What progress has been made in workplace practices for women lawyers?

Workplace support for women, in the profession and throughout their progression to senior roles, is essential, and ranges from childcare reform to ensuring respectful and safe workplaces.⁸

¹ Email 25/8/2025 from Luke Rheinberger Executive Director Law Society Tasmania to Government House.

² 76 female Principals compared to 148 males. In 2021, 51 female Principals compared to 153 males.

³ Ibid.

Happily, we have moved forward from the time when there was no maternity leave and few part-time work opportunities in law firms, compared to when I started practising. There have been significant improvements in the workplace, including better leave conditions, more favourable workplace policies, and more positive attitudes. Most Tasmanian law firms now offer flexible workplaces and negotiate flexible work arrangements for women with children.⁴

This is smart as studies have linked flexible workplaces to lower staff turnover, reduced absenteeism, increased productivity and improved employee morale.⁵

It goes without saying that access to affordable childcare and opening hours of childcare centres are crucial for women's progression. In this respect, we should look to Nordic and Scandinavian countries, which offer free and high-quality childcare.

3. Harassment

Last time I spoke, sexual harassment was an issue in the profession. At that time, the Australian Bar Association (ABA) acknowledged that harassment, including sexual harassment, was a widespread problem. The ABA argued it could only be tackled by all parts of the profession working together to eradicate such behaviour.

In 2019, a Law Society of Tasmania survey found that bullying and harassment were prevalent in our profession. Since July 2021, it has been compulsory for all practising certificate holders to complete a Sexual Harassment-Changing Workplace Culture Workshop. This is a commendable initiative. Also, most law firms have sexual harassment and bullying policies. However, I am not so naïve as to believe that harassment and bullying will not occur in our legal workplaces.

I am sure many of us here, as I did, have had to navigate, at times, harassment, sexist comments, gender pay gaps and bullying by some senior lawyers. I managed this by talking to family or friends. I found it uncomfortable and

⁴ 74 percent of all respondents for the 2017-2018 Law Society Survey, reported that their firm or agency had a culture that supported flexible workplace practices.

⁵ WGEA <https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/the-best-mothers-day-gift-flexiblework> for women and men page2, accessed 29/9/2021.

difficult to speak up, especially when I was the only female in a nine-partner law firm. I had a few scars, but they have faded over time.

It is crucial that we have positive workplace cultures and support available. We need to continue to monitor and aim to end harassment and bullying and other inappropriate behaviour. Simply, this behaviour should not be tolerated. We must have mechanisms for reporting so that individuals feel comfortable about speaking up and not feel better off staying silent. The Tasmanian Legal Profession Board, for example, has a reporting mechanism to empower individuals to speak up on their own terms. This includes an informal report submitted through a portal, with the option to remain anonymous, or a formal written complaint for investigation. There is also an option to speak to a member of the Board's Response Team.

It is up to leaders in our profession to build a culture in which these behaviours are not tolerated and in which those who experience or witness this speak up. Failures by law practices to manage these behaviours can have and has a damaging effect on individuals.⁶ Sexual harassment and bullying are breaches of lawyers' professional conduct⁷ and undermine the reputation of the legal profession.⁸

4. Wellbeing

Our workplace also includes issues such as mental health and wellbeing. Law is a demanding career. Clients can be difficult, as can other lawyers. The relentless pressure of email communication, billable hours, and excessive workloads can take their toll.

A recent report reveals that the first five years of legal practice are a critical period, as wellbeing results were lower for this group, and experiences of incivility were higher.⁹

⁶ <https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/lawyers/practising-law/sexual-harassment/sexual-harassment-report>, A message from the Board Chair and Commissioner, accessed 9 September 2025.

⁷ Legal Profession(Solicitors' Conduct) Rules 2020, 47.

⁸ <https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/lawyers/practising-law/sexual-harassment/sexual-harassment-report>, A message from the Board Chair and Commissioner, accessed 9 September 2025.

⁹ Lawyer wellbeing, workplace experiences and ethics , Australian National University and University of Melbourne

This is why a range of supports, such as flexibility in work arrangements, additional days in lieu of extra hours, monitoring of workloads and positive attention to employees should be adopted in legal workplaces.¹⁰

I was pleased to hear that my old law firm, Murdoch Clarke, has a mental health committee and also runs lunchtime relaxation and even Pilates! I am sure other firms will be engaging in workplace wellbeing and introducing these types of initiatives to support their lawyers.

It is also pleasing to hear that one of the Compulsory Professional Development (CPD) points required each year is equality and wellbeing.

We can also look after our own wellbeing by doing such things as spending time with family and friends, adopting a healthy lifestyle, and separating work from non-work life.¹¹

So, as in the wider workplace, there are some improvements, but there is always more we can do to improve workplace behaviour and supports for women lawyers. We must ensure that a positive workplace culture is a priority in our profession to retain and advance women lawyers.¹²

5. Some Suggestions

May I now turn to some suggestions, which I have learnt over my career and which I hope are of some help as you set out in your careers.

Firstly, women lawyers' associations can provide support to you. Tasmanian Women Lawyers provides a network to exchange information and experiences, to mentor junior members, and to encourage women into the profession and their advancement.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <https://lsbc.vic.gov.au/lawyer-wellbeing-workplace-experiences-ethics>

¹² <https://www.aspg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Improving-Workplace-Culture:Lessons> from the Legal Profession, Kieran Pender, accessed 9 September 2025

¹³ <https://womenlawyers.org.au>.

Also, mentors can help you in your future paths. There are now many senior female role models for younger female practitioners. Do not be worried about approaching someone you admire; most senior lawyers should be open to mentoring. Personally, I consider that support for colleagues through mentoring is a duty of senior colleagues in a progressive workplace.

We are reminded of the importance of mentoring in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt,

“For our own success to be real, it must contribute to the success of others.”

Secondly, what can you do if you are underconfident?

I am sure many of us here share, or have shared at times, that underconfident feeling.

On confidence building, may I share a favourite quote from Janet Yellen, the 78th US Treasury Secretary, the 15th Chair of the US Federal Reserve and the first woman to hold both roles. She admitted, “... I do a lot of preparation. I don’t wing it...I don’t feel super-confident, no matter what position I’ve been in...”¹⁴

It may help you to read this quote at times when you feel uncertain.

So, my advice to overcome any lack of confidence you may feel is to work hard and prepare well in whatever work you do.

Regarding opportunities, such as job offers or promotion offers, consider taking up any that arise, even if they seem daunting at the time. Believe in yourself, go for it, and you won’t look back.

Thirdly, what do you do if you have a setback?

My advice is that if you have a setback or make a mistake, which we all do, be kind to yourself rather than being overly critical. It is our attitude to those mistakes that counts.

¹⁴ *The Authority Gap* Mary Ann Sieghart Penguin Random House 2021, page 101.

My personal motto is “never give up.” We can all learn from mistakes and setbacks – persevere and do better the next time.

That’s why I like this quote of Arianna Huffington (Founder & CEO, Thrive Global)

“We need to accept that we don’t always make the right decisions, that we’ll screw up royally sometimes. Understand that failure is not the opposite of success, it’s part of success.”

May I also suggest, be yourself and always keep a sense of humour, it is valuable and very therapeutic.

6. Legal Bubble

Finally, I have noticed that generally, as lawyers, we tend to stay in our legal bubble, with our lawyer friends and colleagues. I have learned through my community engagement role as Governor that outside the law, there are many talented and knowledgeable women in Tasmania, in the public service, private businesses, government business enterprises, or not-for-profit organisations. When I participated in a program called the Hobart Mentor Walks program, which involved a group of mentors, I thought it was unfortunate that there were no young female practising lawyers among the mentees. Such a group is a means of exchanging knowledge with other women from diverse backgrounds, of learning from experienced professional women, and of connecting with other young women mentees.

So, I encourage you to try to find the time to widen your networks. I believe this will be helpful for your personal and professional development.

Conclusion

May I conclude that we can be pleased about the progress of women lawyers in our Tasmanian legal profession since 2021. I look forward to seeing more appointments of women to senior positions and further improvements in workplace culture over the next few years.

Thank you, and I wish each and every one of you the best in your future careers.