

# Women of substance

HOW DO WOMEN FARE THESE DAYS IN JOURNALISM? CLARE FLETCHER ASKED AROUND. CARTOON BY TOSHIKO NISHIDA.

It's an old chestnut which does the rounds every so often: Why are there not more women at the top in the Australian media? Increasingly, women are being recognised as outstanding journalists. Three of the top Walkley awards last year went to women: Michelle Grattan was honoured for journalistic leadership, Colleen Egan for her outstanding contribution to journalism and Kate Geraghty was named Photographer of the Year. And two of the three-member ABC TV winning team for the Gold Walkley were women: Liz Jackson and Lin Buckfield.

But to date there have been only four female editors of major metropolitan dailies. Ita Buttrose was editor-in-chief at *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* in the early 1980s, then moved to *The Sun-Herald*. Michelle Grattan was at *The Canberra Times*, Jeni Cooper at *The Sunday Telegraph* and last year Liz Deegan was appointed editor of Brisbane's *Sunday Mail*.

So is Australian journalism still a boys' club? These days, enrolments in media and journalism courses are dominated by women, while anecdotal evidence suggests that women are well represented at middle-management levels, running sections, magazines and managing reporting staff.

We asked some of Australia's most successful journalists why women still aren't shattering the glass ceiling.

Geraghty, who in 2003 was sent to cover the war in Iraq for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, says she has been given "every opportunity" by her bosses. In her career so far, her gender hasn't been an issue.

"I was sent to cover the Iraq war in 2003, the aftermath of the tsunami in Aceh, and the war in Lebanon amongst many other overseas assignments, so for me I have always been treated as an equal."

Women are well represented at Fairfax, shooting news and features, and in management roles on the photographic desks, she says.

"I hope we are a good role model for young women hoping to work in the media. We've worked long and hard to get where we are in our careers."

The *SMH*'s Kate McClymont is another regular award winner for her investigative work. She believes women are sometimes hindered by wanting to strike a work/life balance in a profession where this can be nigh on impossible when a big story is running: "We will never get there until men feel the same level of guilt or concern about balancing the commitment to work against the commitment to home life," she says. "It is still women who organise child care. More men might be looking after their children more, but only after their partner organises it all."

She also believes that too many women simply don't push hard enough for preferment, quoting Shane Warne: "If you don't ask, you don't get."

McClymont's point about the work/life balance is echoed by academic and columnist Susan Maushart, who believes this is "indubitably" the greatest challenge for women in the media and one that employers could be doing a lot more to help with.

"Employers can do so much more than they are presently doing – especially providing serious part-time and job-share options for women with families."

Maushart is quick to point out that the qualities of great journalists have nothing to do with gender. "Really, I hate to be tiresome, but I don't think there's

anything gender specific about these qualities: unslakable curiosity, passion, pigheadedness verging on obsessionality, an excellent shit-detector..."

Few people are better qualified to talk about the qualities needed to make a successful investigative journalist than *Four Corners*' Chris Masters. The award-winning writer and broadcaster says "it is not a mistake that women have done so well in investigative journalism".

"Over the years I've noticed that women are much better at gentle investigative techniques – earning trust and cooperation so often reveals the best stories."

Masters is also concerned that women can be hindered in their careers by the work/life balance issue. He cites his mother Olga, one of this country's great writers, who waited until she had raised her children before really concentrating on her writing.

Masters says he has watched *Four Corners* evolve from a mostly male staff, with women generally in support and research roles, to a slight majority of female reporters. With more job-sharing structured into the system, he thinks there is now more respect for the importance of family.

"I believe we're facing a serious period of adjustment, and repositioning of responsibility. There is a revolution going on, but it's a quiet one and one that will take a long time."

While the same problems remain – "it's much easier to grow old in this business as a male than as a female" – Masters is optimistic about the future.

"Like education, the media may be one profession that is becoming more accommodating of females and recognising their place in top management."

But for Neil Breen, the editor of Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph* newspaper, more should be done to help women climb the ladder in journalism.

"It's very, very hard for women to reach the top of the tree in the media," he says. "I think women get shafted."

Breen, who has Helen McCabe as his deputy editor, says it is a "long, hard battle" for women in the media.

"They won't like me saying this, but I really admire the women like Jacquelin Magnay, Rebecca Wilson and Nicole Jeffery, who are such great sport journalists. They really have to work four times as hard as a bloke."

"I remember when I was sports editor at *The Courier-Mail*, Louise Evans was the sports editor at *The Australian*. Everyone used to refer to *The Australian*'s sports desk as 'petticoat junction'. I just thought it was disgraceful."

"Women do good jobs. There's no reason why they're not in top management positions, except for the work/life balance challenge," he says. "As an industry we owe it to ourselves to have more women in management... It's vital."

For Maushart, the responsibility with breaking through the glass ceiling and into the boys' club rests with women themselves.

"Individuals do need to take the bit between their own teeth, to use an unfortunate metaphor. Our tendency to be risk-averse – to play it safe and 'be nice' and hold fast to whatever shreds of jobs we get handed – is no way to facilitate social change," she says.

Clare Fletcher is a staff member of The Walkley Foundation.

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