

MY JOURNEY TO EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT

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I was born in Sydney in 1962, much loved and wanted, some seven months after my Air Force pilot father died in a military accident. My mother, despite her grief and sense of loss, bore the responsibility of parenting two young girls, and working to support us. She was my first strong female role model. When I was five she remarried a journalist. I learnt from him that education and moral courage were essential life skills.

Those early beginnings instilled in me independence, resilience and a strength of character I was to need as an adult. I knew I was a capable, smart, high-achieving individual who wanted to experience satisfaction, success and enjoyment in my chosen profession, and I was determined to make my mark in the world – by joining the military, then very much a man's domain.

I am proud to say I went on to serve 37 years in the military... but the first 15 or so was just about survival – surviving inequality, disempowerment, sexual harassment, misogynistic behavior and a sexual assault. I bore the pain of those experiences for many years; something I later channeled into my work supporting military women in their careers. At the time, I was determined to face these challenges and my fears, and I sought personal and professional growth through many unconventional activities: being a guard commander for an all-male guard, at a time when women were not allowed to bear arms; serving in a ship with only one other woman out of a crew of 212, deploying to a multi-national coalition operation in Afghanistan.

Along the way, I found in myself a free spirit, independent of thought and action. I have built my personal life on these principles. I have two beautiful daughters who are smart, resilient, value themselves and make their own choices. What I want for all women – equality and empowerment – I have achieved with my daughters.

In the past 10 years I have created change for, and improved the lives of, women and girls in both conflict and national contexts. This has been through advocacy, research, cultural reform and, most importantly, action. I believe that women are not free when any woman is unfree, and I am recognised as having contributed to the efforts to address injustices in this area, and in having expertise and experience about which people want to hear. It is my efforts to empower women for which I am most proud to leave as my legacy; it is the work for which my daughters admire my strength, tenacity, willpower and fortitude.

I am, like all women, multifaceted and enjoy the paradoxes of my life, and those things that define my uniqueness – such as my love of motorbikes and quilting! Like all women, I have made mistakes and poor choices, and made heart-rendering decisions – which caused grief, hurt, and unhappiness – but emerged a much stronger, more resilient and capable woman. As I look back on my life and reflect on all of the things that made me who I am today, I am proud of that woman. Today, efforts continue to ensure women's equal rights, their empowerment in all aspects of their lives, the ability to make their own choices, to be free. I am a part of that. I feel strong and courageous, and I want other women and young girls to be that, too.

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