

2017 Hal Wootten Lecture

Journey of a restless advocate

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It is an absolute pleasure and a privilege to be here today, to continue what has become the established tradition of the Hal Wootten lecture. It is an even greater pleasure that the namesake of this lecture series is present to hear and respond to my small contribution. Thank you Hal. I wish that there was more of this kind of tradition, not only in lecture series, but in life - where we pause to celebrate and engage with a community of experience and ideas, with the legacy of those still amongst us.

Hal has described the lecture series named in his honour as an opportunity for the speaker to talk about their “life in the law” - to reflect on their obligations and responsibilities as lawyers, and how they’ve used this to shape a society where social justice is held dear. It’s also an opportunity for the speaker to reflect on how they have used the law and the person they’ve become to initiate reforms which uphold the rights of the vulnerable.ⁱ

Social justice has been much of my life’s work, so it's a great honour to be speaking tonight.

Recently I spent an enjoyable afternoon reading through the impressive lectures delivered since the series’ inception. I took equal pleasure from Hal's responses, highlighting his philosophy on the law’s place in society.

But before I begin I’d like you to join me in acknowledging that we meet on the lands of the Bedegal people, and I pay my respects to their elders both past and present and I thank them for their custodianship of this land.

This lecture series is designed as an opportunity for organic and respectful exchange and is exactly the model that UNSW put forth over four decades ago. Eschewing the convention of the traditional lecture, UNSW took what was then a radical approach and chose to offer smaller class sizes in law - ones in which students and academics shared in an exchange of ideas and mutual learning.

This was radical in many ways. It signaled the view that the law itself was neither static, nor an island – that it evolves; that it adapts to community standards, as Sir Gerard Brennan’s very illuminating lecture explained; that it is influenced by other disciplines, by politics and by timing; that it can entrench power as well as challenge it.ⁱⁱ

Those of us privileged enough to have received a legal education, therefore, also share a responsibility to ensure that respect, ethics and integrity lie at the core of what we do; that community confidence in our work remains paramount; that we use our experience and education to make the world a more JUST place: and, as the words out there in the hall remind us, that we ensure that the law is not brought to bear unduly on the vulnerable.

This still rings true today, as David Dixon's welcome to students in 2014 also explained: that a UNSW law degree is not just about gaining a qualification in order to reap personal benefit from the world. Rather, it is about taking this qualification out into the world, so as to inform whatever else you happen to be doing – whether as an artist, an athlete, or as an advocate for democracy.ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, I have learned that we are all on this journey of serving the interests of the law together, and that we can inform the lessons that we take from it, rather than just parroting an unchanging truth. For me, this has meant accepting that I am likely not only to remain an advocate and a reformer throughout my life, but a restless one at that - someone who continuously adds to their reforming toolbox along the way.

Today, then, I'd like to share a little about "my life in law" - the decisions that took me not only to UNSW Law School but which then propelled my career; as well as the important things I have learned along the way.

Given my background, a career in the law could be seen by some as a surprising decision. My father was a doctor and my mother a science graduate (and, as it happens, both my sisters followed my father into the medical field, my twin sister as a Professor in the Medical School at Sydney University, while my younger sister, an academic here at UNSW, and now the Chief Medical Officer for Tennis Australia).

Consequently, we all grew up, in and around my father's medical practice - a practice in which he combined being a physician with Nuclear Medicine. He established the first nuclear medicine private practice in about 1966, having introduced the discipline to St George Hospital Sydney when he was Medical Superintendent. I remember when we were able to transmit images from the private practice to the hospital electronically, an everyday occurrence now but in the early 1970s a revolutionary breakthrough in medical technology!

I did odd jobs after school and, once I got my driver's license, ferried patients to and from hospitals. Later, as a law student, I typed Dad's medical letters. Accordingly, I became chief medical consultant to my fellow students and eventually the partners in my law firm!. But it was in transporting patients and the close contact involved, that I got the first glimpses of what I would like to do as a career. It was on one of these trips I remember ferrying a woman with a suspected pulmonary embolus. I helped her into the car, a proud newly minted driver. Yet, upon inquiring

about my father and my family, her only remark was to say: “What no sons? Oh your poor father. No-one to carry on the family name”.

Perhaps it was this experience that propelled me into my subsequent roles and into the role as Australia’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner! I’ll never know, but my early life experience meant that I would never lose my love of technology and my desire to change lives.

Against this background, I was constantly immersed in science and maths. At an all-girls’ school and from a highly feminised household I was never exposed to the pernicious trend in which girls were discouraged from developing skills in STEM. Certainly, the Harvard Implicit Associate Test, which tested more than half a million people globally, found that 70% of the test takers associated ‘male’ with science, and ‘female’ with the arts.^{iv}

Blissfully unaware of this gendered association, my decision to attend UNSW Law was an easy one. I was drawn to law because my 18 year old self told me that law was a profession where you could have both a strong career and a family – what was I thinking? - that you could help build strong societies by elevating the voices of those rarely heard, that a law degree was a strong foundation for many interesting roles.

UNSW was the only Law School at the time (in keeping with its emphasis on all round learning) which offered a combined degree of Law and Computer Science. It was therefore not until university - where I chose to study chemistry and computer science, together with law - that any gender imbalance confronted me. I still remember turning up to my first digital logic and assembler programming class in the School of Engineering - 100 men... and me. I knew pretty early on that if I was to have any chance of passing I would need to trade my essay writing skills for some lengthy computer programming tutoring and, with my grades underpinned by this symbiotic relationship, we all got along very nicely!

As one of only three women in my year doing a combined IT and law degree at the University at the time, I finally graduated in 1984. Following several years working and living overseas, I returned to Australia in my late 20s - just as the world wide web was emerging. Technology was coming into law firms presenting a wave of opportunity – a wave that I was able to ride by accepting a role at Dawson Waldron (now Ashurst) to establish their first Legal Technology practice.

My colleagues were skeptical. They told me that I was wasting my law degree. It could be career suicide they warned. “Don’t you want to be a *real* lawyer?”. Self-awareness, however, is a crucial life companion. My passion was to create a new way of delivering legal services, one that would demystify the law, and hopefully make it more accessible and less expensive – just as the emergence of other forms of technology had made medical breakthroughs more accessible and less expensive for my father’s patients all those years ago.

My first assignment was to set up the technology and management of evidence for the Ok Tedi mine case in Papua New Guinea, to be heard in the Superior Court at Port Moresby. The top of a mountain had collapsed into the Ok Tedi tailings pond at a cost of \$130 million. The dispute was over who was going to pay - the operator, BHP, or its insurers.^v

The case preparations appeared to be going along fine. We had designed state of the art networking systems running from the Supreme Court to the hotel. What we didn't know, however - and what we hadn't calculated on - was that the court hadn't paid their telephone bill for the last four years and, as a result, the state telecommunications company had cut off all telecommunications to the court!

In fact, matters went from bad to worse. We then received a call from Data General, the company who was to provide us with IT support on the ground. That task would not be possible they told me - because the man who was to provide the IT support had been axed...and I don't mean sacked. He had actually been split down the middle in an attempted robbery!

When, on the first day of the trial, the client brought around a huge machete to keep near the door just in case - I was really wondering whether I had made the right decision to combine law and technology. After one week of hearing, however, the plaintiff and defendant decided that arbitration was an easier option and we all breathed a sigh of relief - me in particular!

That case taught me about Murphy's law - if something can go wrong, it will. But I also learned about disruption: for change to happen, you must disrupt the status quo. This goes for the law, just as much as technology. In Papua New Guinea we saw an example of why formal access to the law is not necessarily enough, and why human beings can make or break a situation. We need to be alive to this, as well as to be continuously questioning what is valuable about traditional approaches and what is not. This is also true for gender equality.

By 1991, the firm had appointed me to head the Legal Technology Group - which sounded seriously grand but was really just my assistant and me. Over the next 5 years, however, the group grew to be 8 lawyers. One day, I had a day that started like any other, a team member popped into my office to tell me she was pregnant. The same afternoon another senior lawyer came to see me with the same news. When three weeks later a third lawyer joined the mother-to be queue and what they didn't know was that I was also pregnant, we knew we had a challenge on our hands. That was half the entire legal team that would be out on maternity leave at exactly the same time.

As the person in charge I had to find solutions and find them fast. So, I developed the office's business case for a flexible work place. My premise was simple - that work and care should NEVER sit at opposite ends of one hard choice. It's pure common sense. If a workplace is flexible and allows workers to balance both work and life, it will allow for a greater retention of talented staff and higher productivity.

We decided not to ask for permission but rather to step up and take action, and, if necessary, the explanations and apologies would come later. As part of this new way of working we needed individuals who shared our vision for change. I was presented with a list of CVs for a potential new secretarial recruit – and then I came to Michelle’s CV. Now, Michelle had been a secretary for 3 weeks but she’d been a nanny for 6 years. With those credentials, we knew we needed her on our team.

Thinking outside the square, we developed flexible work arrangements for all our new mums in which we drew on Michelle’s skills to care for our children while sharing roles at work. Again, an example of putting what people actually *need* at the centre of a solution, rather than maintaining the status quo for the status quo’s sake.

Over the years we went on to build a high impact team where flexibility was core to how we worked. We didn’t set out to change the world, just to build flexibility in our small team. What I learned, however, was a little like Paul Kelly’s song, that out of small things, big things grow – it’s something I’ve experienced time and time again across my career.

I continued to build my career within Blake Dawson, now Ashursts, which included periods on the Board and time spent in an internet incubator. These were exciting times – the mid 90s. We toiled away, re-imagining new models for the delivery of legal services - services such as LegalLastMinute.com - where law firms could even out the ebbs and flows of supply and demand.

We recognised that a billable hour is a perishable good. If you don't sell it today it is worth nothing tomorrow. Our web services concept allowed law firms to sell excess capacity to LegalLastMinute.com and clients could then buy forward at a discount. We also experimented with Artificial Intelligence. What did I learn? I learned that being 20 years ahead of the game is as problematic as being 20 years behind!!

By the early 2000s, I came to realise more fully the struggles for women within large law firms – the loss of valuable female talent, the fact that very few females ever made it to the top. It was from then on that I became passionate about trying to change the systems that were producing such disadvantage for women in law. This desire to "fix the system", rather than to “fix the women” has been a lifelong mantra.

But how do you "fix the system"? To answer this, I fell back on the lessons this law school had taught me – that I had a responsibility to use my voice and experience to advocate for the rights of women and to create a more gender equal and JUST society from which everyone would benefit, not just law firms.

Certainly, over the last few years, the work of promoting gender equality is becoming more and more difficult. Each day I sense that our progress towards gender equality is *slowing*; and that hostility to human rights is actually *growing*. While I don’t have clear data for this, my meetings with

human rights defenders across the world tell me it is so. I have just returned from Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka, where I once again heard from human rights defenders that women's rights around the globe are facing an alarming backlash.

As the UN independent expert group on Discrimination Against Women warns: "The world is at a crossroads, with the very concept of gender equality being increasingly contested in some quarters".^{vi}

First, I've come to understand that law and reform must be about people; that the rule of law and democracy are not there to serve an academic ideal but rather to serve ordinary communities and individuals.

We don't take action because of the statistics we've read, or the legal principles we've considered. Rather, we take action because of our interactions with other human beings. So in all my dealings, I hold the experiences and stories of individual people in the forefront of my mind as this is what keeps me driven and energised.

I describe it as holding my compassionate self (the part of me that is the keeper of thousands of stories) beside my strategic self (the part of me that engages in reform and advocacy). When I step up to advocate for change, it's not just Liz Broderick speaking. It's Liz Broderick fuelled by the thousands of instances of inequality I have witnessed over many decades. That's what fuels me – that's what makes me influential.

As Sex Discrimination Commissioner, and since, I have met extraordinary, inspiring and everyday people – people whose stories remind me that gender equality goes to the heart of who we are and how we live; that while we may have formal equality in our statutes, equality is not the lived experience for so many Australians, so many people across the world. Let me share with you some of the stories that come to my mind.

I remember Lurline. Picture this. I am in Hobart to visit women's refuges. Lurline is running a young women's refuge there. Every day Lurline makes sure that girls escaping violence, substance abuse and poverty have food, a warm bed, and a chance at an uninterrupted education. On the morning I arrive, Lurline has been up at 2am to resolve a dispute between one resident and her boyfriend, then again at 3.30am to call the police because the boyfriend came to torch the refuge and finally at 6am to get the girls to school.

Like so many in that sector, Lurline's role is unrelenting. She is 72 years old and should have the option of retiring from paid work, but for her the price of a lifetime caring for her own family and then working in care is to be consigned to poverty in later life. Lurline's story prompted me to ask, "is poverty a JUST reward for a lifetime spent caring?" Because that is where so many older women in our nation are at. Do I not have a responsibility to try and change that?

Now see Maria. I'm in Western Australia and Maria is working hard in the construction industry. Many of us might take for granted the capacity to have a career and a family in the 21st century. When Maria announces her pregnancy, however, her manager's response is to say: "Your choice Maria, the job or the baby?" The consequences for Maria's hastily made choice are later devastating.

Maria's story teaches us that decisions that are *made by those in power have an impact on individual lives*. Work and care should never sit at opposite ends of one hard choice and it is my responsibility to change this.

Finally, picture Jane, a young woman in our armed forces who I meet in Queensland and who excels in her training course with distinction. Just the kind of woman the military would nurture and encourage, we might assume. Yet, she is subjected to extreme bullying and exclusion - turned backs; no one speaking to her on exercise for weeks on end; alone for meals at the mess while her colleagues bantered at the next table.

Jane's participation comes at immense personal cost. *Yet she finds the courage to speak out and, by doing so, reminds us that words can be powerful beyond belief. She taught me that I must use the influence I have to create command and control organisations where women can thrive equally with men.*

The stories I heard echoed the feminist adage, that 'the personal is political' - reminding me constantly that the lived experience of inequality, of exclusion, of hardship is what matters. What's more, the personal is precisely the thing that will ultimately spark change – it is the stories that will enable us to take that next step forward.

So the second lesson I've come to understand is that to create change, I must take these human stories directly to the heart of power. I must identify where power resides within organisations, within nations and then take the human stories directly there.

In 2011, I led a Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force. As I travelled across Australia and beyond, a great many people told me stories about how the ADF had served them well. That was the majority. Others, however, told deeply distressing stories – stories like Jane's, stories they had never told before. As we progressed I realised that, while it was important to document these stories, it was even more vital that those who had the power to redress the wrongs – in other words, powerful men - heard these stories first hand.^{vii}

So what did we do? We made arrangements so that the Chiefs of Navy, Airforce, Army, and other senior personnel could hear from the women themselves what extreme exclusion means; what it's like to be on exercise for four months when no-one speaks to you; what it's like to be sexually assaulted by your instructor, the very person you go to for advice; what it means to have your career ruined because you spoke out.

I'll certainly never forget that first face to face session we organised in my office at the Australian Human Rights Commission – the relevant Service Chief arriving early and sitting uncomfortably in his chair – then a mother nervously escorting her trembling daughter to the chair beside, a box of tissues in the middle. Then that courageous young woman said simply “Sir, I’m so nervous” and the Chief replied, “Believe me, I’m scared too.”

In that moment, I knew we had a chance at change. It takes a courageous young woman and an authentic and compassionate military leader to admit that he fears what he’s about to be told. There was no way to unhear, unsee, unfeel the stories that these Service Chiefs heard. Nor was there any way to unhear the heartbreak of mothers who had encouraged their daughters into the service believing that the enemy lay outside not within. One mother turned to the Chief and said, “I gave you the person I love most in the world and this is how you treated her?” There were no words that could adequately respond to that.

All of our military Chiefs demonstrated enormous courage and compassion in those face to face meetings. These sessions taught me that in order to change the systems we must take the human stories to the seat of power. That it’s through hearing and feeling exclusion’s consequences first hand, we plant the seeds of reform.

This work also made me think more about systems change and whether women would be able to change the systems alone. Because it seemed to me that most of the systems operating in Australia and around the world today have been designed by men for men, the legal system being no different.

As Gordon Cairns, Chair of Woolworths explains “Let’s not pretend that there aren't already established norms that advantage men. Men invented the system. Men largely run the system. Men need to step up beside women to change the system.”^{viii}

This is when I came to believe very strongly that, if we want to create a more gender equal Australia, we actually have to focus on the role of men. With this epiphany, several years ago I picked up the phone and rang 21 of Australia’s most powerful and influential men – men who lead Australia’s iconic companies like Telstra, Qantas, Commonwealth Bank and Woolworths – men who lead global organisations like Citibank and IBM – men who hold the most senior roles in Government – Secretary of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Treasury and the Army – and I made a personal plea. Would they use their power and influence, their collective voice and wisdom to pursue gender equality?

I remember clearly the first conversation I had. This particular CEO had twins – a boy and a girl. I explained to him that in Australia at that time women held only 3% CEO positions. Indeed at that time there were more men named Peter than women at the top of ASX 200 companies and women only occupied 8% of board directorships. In every sector in Australia the basic rule is that the higher

up you go the less women you see. That these results persisted despite, in 2012, women representing more than 60% of university graduates and 50.8% of Australia's population.

Whilst we've been talking about the numbers for decades, what shifted for this CEO was the understanding that, without intervention by decent powerful men, this story would become his daughter's story. His daughter would never have the same opportunities as her twin brother – all because she was born a girl. For the first time, not only did he understand the case for change with his head he started to understand it *with his heart*.

With that in mind, I remember our first MCC get together, a little like that first Computer Science class I attended here at UNSW, 21 A-type male personalities and me – some having travelled thousands of miles to attend. As one man said “This issue is not beyond our intellectual capacity to solve. Excuses are just that!” And from that first meeting the MCC was born.

This is a disruptive strategy. It's designed to be somewhat controversial and, certainly, some thought I was suggesting that women were waiting to be saved by corporate knights in shining armour, galloping paternalistically into territory we've occupied for years. This couldn't be further from the truth. Women's voices remain critical to advancing gender equality and eliminating violence against women. What I also know is that the achievement of gender equality cannot sit on the shoulders of women alone. This is not a women's issue to be solved by women. It's a key economic and social issue which affects everyone. When men step up beside women and take shared ownership, that's when we stride forward together.

Fast forward to the present. Over the last year or so I've come to focus on the place of University residential colleges in Australia and the confidence which the community places in them.

These are institutions that have nurtured the young minds of so many of our powerful men and women. So many influential alumni from law. Alumni including Herbert Evatt from St. Andrews College – the youngest ever justice of the high court and former president of the UN General Assembly; Sybil Morrison from Women's College, first female practicing barrister in NSW; Justice Roderick Meagher from St. Johns college, legal scholar and former justice of the court of appeal; Justice Reginald Barrett from Wesley College, Justice of court of appeal and Judge of the Supreme Court, and so many more. All of you will know these names, these being individuals who have lived “Great lives in law”.

You may be aware that there is increasing public scrutiny on the safety of young people at University and in Residential Colleges. My work leading a cultural review into five Colleges has confirmed for me that young people, far from being disinterested, have a strong desire to step up and shape a more gender equal future.

College can be a rite of passage for many young people. It's a place to learn about your standing in the world. Men and women come to College wanting to belong, to be respected, to be loved – to feel connected in brotherhood and sisterhood and in the broader community.

The problem is, if they have not answered the question “who am I?”, they often fall at the feet of a darker question:

What is the price I will pay to fit in? Am I willing to subvert my individual values, my integrity, my ethics in order to identify with the group? What value will I place on tradition for tradition's sake?

The problem with tradition is that it can continue long past its use by date. The White Australia Policy was a tradition. The expectation that women would not work once they were married was a tradition. For many of us here, it's a good thing that they're no longer traditions. But they didn't just disappear on their own. They disappeared because someone thought differently and had the courage to question the status quo.

The practice of law itself had many traditions - both good and bad. Some of its most fundamental premises, including the principles which evolved from the Magna Carta, were nevertheless developed by - and for - men of property, with nobody else remotely in mind.

This legacy has seen the conventions of the law designed on a foundation of homogeneity with little appreciation of difference; of disadvantage; or of 'otherness'. This legacy also meant that, for centuries, gendered assumptions about the role of women in society left women without power; disenfranchised; and treated as the property of first their fathers, and then their husbands.

Tradition has also meant that gendered assumptions about acceptable behaviours of men and women have shaped the law's response to countless issues - from the development of the law of equity through to the responses to sexual assault and gendered violence. Certainly, our glacial capacity to recognise family violence is just one example; while the fact that there are jurisdictions in Australia which have still not abolished the law of provocation is another.

These failures to relinquish the harmful effects of tradition are not just a matter of the distant past. In looking at overseas experience, I have read about some of the outdated traditions which *still* exist in University settings around the world, the hazing and harassment rituals woven into the fabric of student life; the belief that these rituals will somehow build a stronger group, a group that will accept and conform to social norms.

Yet the evidence is clear. In the most comprehensive US survey of hazing ever conducted, it was found that for more than 2/3 of students who had been hazed there were decidedly negative outcomes - outcomes affecting their academic achievement; their social interactions; and, for some, their life trajectory.

And so my work now is focused on the changes that must be made to ensure that all students can thrive within Australia's university system. Of course, there will be those that vehemently disagree that any change is needed, that things are working very well just the way they are. What I have learnt over the years is that in order to change any culture, University culture included, I will need to make space for all views to be aired. This involves examining and listening to what people value about tradition, but then ensuring that this can be meaningful and positive for all members of the community.

Which brings me to the fifth important lesson for which my time at UNSW Law has equipped me – the value of engaging with those who may not share our own views, at least initially, or indeed, who may utterly oppose your views – in a respectful exchange of ideas.

For this reason, I was fascinated to read in Hal Wooten's response to Julian Burnside that Julian had decided to answer every piece of hate mail – an act of extraordinary diligence but also of grace. Through this simple act of courtesy he displayed to each correspondent – no matter how hostile the correspondence itself had been – respect for the discussion and, on many occasions, a change of heart at the other end. I'm keeping this approach front of mind as I engage as a board member of Australian Rugby Union! Because as we all know when you launch into a conversation about change, the conversation can be difficult. Discussions can quickly become polarised. Creating a safe space for all views to be aired is critical to making progress.^{ix}

How do you create a safe place, though? Step number one is so basic but often forgotten in the emotion of the moment. The first step is "Don't assume that those who hold views contrary to yours come with bad intent". When you set out in this way, it is very difficult to move the conversation forward. Assuming bad intent almost instantly cuts you off from understanding *why* someone does something or believes what they do.

As Megan Phelps-Roper reminds us in her compelling personal narrative about change "We forget that [the other is] a human being with a lifetime of experience that shaped their mind, and we get stuck on the first wave of anger, and the conversation has a very hard time ever moving beyond it. But when we assume good or neutral intent we give our minds a much stronger framework for dialogue." We open up the possibility of change.^x

When opening up this possibility, however, we must always remember that this experience of change may be acutely uncomfortable. As Anand Giridhaadas writes in his letter to "all those who have lost in this era."^{xi}

"I now see ...there is a subtler, quieter varietal of disadvantage and that is feeling history to be moving away from you - ...that the world is becoming less and less familiar, less yours, day by day."

He continues:

“I will not concede for a moment that old privileges should not dwindle. They cannot dwindle fast enough. It is for you to learn to live in a new century in which there are no bonuses for showing up with the right skin colour or the right [gender]. ...But I will admit, fellow citizen, that I have discounted the burden of coping with the loss of status. I have forgotten that what is socially [and organisationally] necessary can also be personally grueling.”

Those who lead must be cognisant of this and understand each individual's experience of change. Too many people seek to change things before understanding the investment that each individual has made in *what is there already*. This means that we must understand each individual's contribution to the existing structures and systems *before* trying to change them. Nevertheless, change them we must.

All of this suggests that the role of an advocate for any kind of reform is a difficult one. I have learned, through often humbling experiences, that it is not just a task of charging in with an indisputable case for reform and dismissing the views of any I encounter in my path. What's more, in gathering the many lessons I have accumulated along the way, I have also learned that the role of advocate and human rights defender is a crucial, yet often undervalued one.

Throughout this lecture series we have heard from many esteemed advocates for democracy, for human rights, for the rule of law. We have heard of Julian Burnside's very conscious decision to speak out in the political fray, despite the hostile response from colleagues in certain corners. We have heard of the struggles and often serious personal cost of previously unassuming lawyers who felt compelled by their professional obligations to speak out against the erosion of the rule of law in military environments and at Guantanamo Bay.

And as I said at the beginning, I worry that we are entering a more complex and dangerous environment right around the globe. This means that those who advocate for the rights of others are going to be met with increasing resistance. It will become increasingly dangerous.

In fact, in my role as a Board member at the International Service for Human Rights in Geneva, I work with human rights defenders from across the world, particularly from fragile nations. While many of us here work tirelessly for the interests of human rights, these human rights defenders risk *everything* - their reputation, yes, but also their family and their lives – to stand up for people in some of the most repressive regimes in the world – being China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Honduras and Zimbabwe to name but a few.

In December 2015, a survey-based study was published by New York University revealing that, although many human rights workers are resilient, human rights work is also associated with elevated rates of PTSD and depression. The study even found that levels of PTSD amongst human

rights defenders were *higher* than they were for veterans returning from Afghanistan and almost twice as high as they were for those people affected by natural disasters.^{xii}

This seems incredible, but when the task is so great, it is perhaps little surprise that many actively engaged in promoting a more gender equal world feel a reluctance to look for support; an unwillingness to put their own needs before the needs of others.

We might be forgiven for assuming that this encroaching hostility to the cause of equality – and the impacts that it can have for those who advocate for it - only exists elsewhere. Instead, in October last year, Michel Forst, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders visited Australia and stated:

“I was astounded to observe what has become frequent public vilification of [human] rights defenders in a seeming attempt to discredit, intimidate and discourage them from their legitimate work.”^{xiii}

Over the last 6 months, in fact, there have been more and more voices claiming that women's rights, gender equality, inclusion, diversity are all examples of “identity politics”; that we are living in an era of “political correctness gone mad”; that the women’s empowerment agenda is merely the rantings of the feminist left.

The attacks we experience as human rights defenders are a signal, perhaps, of our retreating regard for the rule of law. Political expedience, of course, hastens this retreat – when we find our self-view as a nation of compassion diminishing.

If we are to value democracy and the rule of law, then we must value those who advocate for them as well. I say this not as a statement of self-interest, but as a lesson sorely learned; one which I have to say is a work in progress.

I say it also as a statement of disruption – and while it may not be as big a reach for advocates in privileged positions to suggest that we should look after ourselves and each other, it is the ultimate act of empowerment for gender equality advocates in many dangerous places around the world to prioritise their own wellbeing. Being well, both physically and mentally, is indeed the ultimate act of political defiance!

So that’s where I’ve come to in ‘my life in law’, the foundations of which were laid right here at the UNSW, and for which I am enormously grateful. I am but one of the many restless advocates this law school has produced, and I certainly won’t be the last and, to be honest, I felt a little torn about sharing my story with you today.

I don’t tell it because it’s more important than anyone else’s. I share it because it reflects a life of constantly learning from others - others who, like the father in the dangerous FATA region in

Pakistan, reminded me only last week “after all, what future do I want for my daughter; for the daughters of the world?”.

If people facing this kind of struggle can keep advocating for gender equality, for the possibility of reform, then surely so can we. As we have seen from recent political events around the world, the defence of human rights and of our shared humanity is becoming more and more challenging. This means that we must support each other and draw strength from each other’s experiences.

UNSW taught me that, far from following a well trodden path, a ‘life in the law’ is about finding your distinctive voice; and then using it to challenge the status quo. A ‘life in the law’ should mean working to ensure that the law is not brought to bear unduly on the disadvantaged. A ‘life in the law’ should mean finding what is valuable about tradition and discarding what is not.

Most of all, a "life in the law" should mean listening to and learning from the experience of others - recognising that we are only one person; that we do not have all the answers on our own but that, together, we *can* effect change.

As one wise woman from an African nation recently told me ‘doing what you can, when you can - that’s how you change the world’.

In times of doubt, this has been my foundation, my mantra - ‘doing what I can, when I can - that’s how I change the world’.

I invite you to also make this mantra yours.

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ⁱⁱ Brennan, G 2012, ‘Lessons from a life in the Law’, 23 August, http://www.law.unsw.edu.au/sites/law.unsw.edu.au/files/images/hal_wootten_lecture_-_sir_gerard_brennan_0.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Dixon, D 2014, ‘A welcome message from the Dean’, 5 March, <http://www.law.unsw.edu.au/news/2014/03/deans-welcome-message-students>

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