

Keynote Address

Speaker - Di Lucas,

Reclaiming Feminism and Gender

Di Lucas worked at the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC) until 2002. During her 14 years there she was involved at both local and national levels in activism to eliminate violence against women and children. This included involvement in policy development, law reform, community development, and education in schools as well as providing counselling and support to survivors of male violence. She was a member of the National Committee on Violence Against Women (1990 - 1993), and a founding member of the Women's Services Network (WESNET) and the National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence (NASASV). Her experience at CRCC was an opportunity to continue grass roots activism in paid employment for which she is eternally grateful. She is now waiting to see what the future holds for her in a professional sense.

I just want to start with a quote that came through on an e-mail message yesterday and which I like and want to share. It is from a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel and it is...There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.

Thank you. Thank you very much for inviting me to speak at your conference, Regroup, Refresh and Reclaim. I am honoured to be asked. Honoured and just a bit daunted. It's pretty amazing to be asked to be a keynote speaker at such a conference and I thank the organisers for their confidence. I feel a special bond with the Queensland Women Against Violence sector having been your guest on a number of other occasions when we have gathered to critique our practices, showcase our innovations and challenge ourselves to keep on with the struggle. I have admired the way Queensland feminists have built up a strong Women Against Violence movement, taking advantage of political spaces left vacant during and with the fall of the Joh Bjelke Petersen government all those years ago. I have also long admired your creativity which has been obvious in the anti violence campaigns and resources produced by you. The Queensland sector is always at the forefront endeavouring to achieve best practice models and to do this you provide regular forums for discussion and evaluation for workers committed to the issue of eliminating violence against women. This has been true in the area of sexual assault and rape as well as for domestic violence. The last time I was here in fact it was to a conference addressing both issues and we all benefited greatly from that interaction and sharing. The conference was inspiring when we consider that in some states the relationship between the two sectors has been historically fraught. Even thinking about it as separate sectors highlights the dangers of division in our work of eliminating violence against women and in our work of supporting those women who have experienced that violence. Our strength lies in working together.

I want to acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women of Queensland who, over the years, have had so many more obstacles put in their path (to put it mildly) by a brutal and racist colonisation of which we non-indigenous women were a part. I would like to acknowledge the Aboriginal land upon which we stand and pay my respects to the elders of this land and say thanks to the people generally for their continuing open heartedness in the face of so much continuing pain and grief. While we non-indigenous women were complicit in many ways in the colonisation and brutalisation of this land, and particularly of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, it is not the time now to sit back and think 'well that was

then and this is now'. The violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander women today and the violence in their communities is directly linked to the history of colonisation. If we are serious about 'reconciliation' (and I use the word respectfully as it can mean different things to different people) it is vital that we non-indigenous women accept our part in history and express our sorrow to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for all the pain and grief they have had to suffer through the past and present practices of governments on behalf of their citizens. In Canberra the Community Services for Women met together for many months and discussed reconciliation. The groups included the rape crisis centre, the two domestic violence refuges, the homeless single women's shelter, the Women's Centre for Health Matters, Inanna, the Domestic Violence Crisis Service, the Women's Legal Centre and the Women's Health Service within the ACT government. One of the results of these discussions is a statement of apology and reconciliation from the non-indigenous women. I would like to share that with you now. As well as the statement the services all contributed panels to a banner that is carried at events like the sorry day bridge walk etc. The statement reads:

Statement of Apology and Reconciliation

To all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, your families and communities. We, the non-indigenous women of this land, apologise for the human suffering and injustice that you have experienced as a result of colonisation and generations of discrimination and marginalisation that has resulted from that. We recognise ourselves as the beneficiaries of this colonisation process and we share with you our feelings of shame and horror at the actions and atrocities that were perpetrated against your people. We recognise you as a sovereign people who have never given up your sovereignty of this land. We acknowledge that the removal of children devastated individuals, families and entire communities and that the intention of those policies was to assimilate Aboriginal children. We recognise this as a policy of genocide. We collectively feel a particular sense of responsibility around these racist policies, as their implementation required the active involvement of community welfare organisations. We unreservedly apologise to the individuals, families and communities for these acts of injustice. We acknowledge your human right to self-determination. We commit to working in solidarity with you in ways that you choose and determine. We are committed to and will work toward an unqualified apology from the Federal Government on behalf of all Australian people. We recognise your leadership. We honour your visions and we join with you in your hopes for your futures and for our futures together. ACT Community Services for Women.

Of course our responsibility doesn't end with saying sorry. We must support the Aboriginal women and their communities to eliminate the violence and we must work towards an anti racist society in which we can all live.

Another group of Queensland women who have inspired me in my work has been the women who have fled their countries seeking safety for themselves and their families. Lucky Queensland to have attracted so many committed and passionate feminists from a variety of countries who have contributed so much to the women's liberation movement and the Women Against Violence Against Women movement specifically. It has been my great pleasure to meet so many of you over the years. You have helped shape Australia's feminist movement into a more respectful and inclusive movement and thank goodness for that!

I tend to use the words 'women's liberation movement' and 'feminism' interchangeably. Partly this is to remind myself that we feminists were born out of the women's liberation movement and to remind myself, and everyone else, that feminism is closely connected to women's liberation.

Feminism itself has been highly debated, challenged, moulded and remoulded, out of which we probably all have our own personal meaning for it in our lives. I better state that feminism for me is not just about women's liberation, though that is a major part of it, it is about the emancipation of all people from the terror and oppression of patriarchy in any and all of its guises. Without the liberation of women there is no liberation for our children, our brothers, husbands, male lovers and man friends. In the Philippines the women's peak body Gabriela has the slogan 'A nation can never be free unless its own women are free!'

Feminism is why we are here today. By that I don't mean that everyone in this room is necessarily a feminist, mores the pity perhaps! I don't mean that we are here because one of the themes of the conference is about reclaiming feminism. I mean that we are here today because without the women's liberation movement and feminism it is highly unlikely that we would be here at a conference sponsored by a Domestic Violence Court Assistance Network provided through the Department Of Families of the Queensland government.

We are here because in the 1960s and 1970s with the resurgence of the women's liberation movement in western countries, women started to talk about their experiences in consciousness raising groups and it became apparent that violence against women was not an isolated phenomenon but instead an accepted form of control within western society. As I read more and more books written by women from different cultures it becomes apparent that this phenomenon is not confined solely to the west but I speak specifically from my position as a western feminist, a middle aged one at that. In these consciousness raising discussions it became apparent too that violence against women was not a result of individual men being abusive or pathological. These women identified that violence against women was pandemic and that individual men were supported by a system of patriarchy that perpetuated further systems abuse of those women who were victims of male violence.

Violence against women, rape, domestic violence and ultimately incest, or as I prefer to call it, child rape or child sexual assault, were put squarely on the agenda by these feminists. Street marches were held, sit ins, speak outs, tribunals, conferences and squats were held, refuges were set up, rape crisis centres were established. In Australia the upsurge of feminist political activity coincided with the election of a Labour government after many years of liberal rule. This Labour government appointed the first 'women's advisers' and established a Bureau of Women's Affairs. This created a situation that proved quite divisive in some ways to the feminist movement but was also very important to the development of services to support women who had experienced male violence. In these days the differences between liberal feminists, socialist feminists, Marxist feminists and radical feminists were critical and relations between them were volatile. Liberal feminists decided to work within the bureaucracy to achieve change while radical feminists thought that they were selling out working within patriarchal structures. Out of this mix however, with the radical feminists on the streets demanding an end to violence and the femocrats working steadily in the bureaucracy to better the conditions for women, came funding for women's refuges and rape crisis centres.

I have to come out now as a confused feminist. Well firstly I have to come out as an unashamedly passionate feminist. It's a definition of myself that umbrellas all the other categories I might attach to myself at some time or another...Lesbian, mother, country girl, middle aged, non-indigenous, Canberra raiders supporter... The confused part is that for many years I have called myself a radical feminist. Then I read some theoretical treatises about feminism and its history in Australia and about liberal feminists, socialist feminists etc, and I felt like I was all of the above! So can I truly call myself a radical feminist if I support liberal feminists in the

bureaucracy working for the rights and safety of women, even if I can't do that myself?

It just all goes to show that nothing is as straightforward as it seems. And in lots of the bad press about feminism the commentators do try to pigeonhole it and define it in ways that support their attacks on it. It has weathered criticisms about its middle class Anglocentricism. It has weathered attacks about its exclusion of lesbians, Aboriginal women; women from non-English speaking backgrounds. It is under attack from a Canberra newsreader who believes that it is feminism's fault that she got to her late 30s without having a child and now is paying the price for that childlessness and she wants feminism to pay the price. My partner is angry that it has been recently attacked for promoting materialism when that is so not what it is about! It gets attacked by conservatives for breaking up the family (and we know what a high price they put on family, well on their type of family.) Men attack it because women are not the same any more, they demand more in their relationships and for their lives generally. Women who want the doors opened for them, who are comfortable living in a male-defined role, attack it. Andrea Dworkin in her book *Right-Wing Women* says that the only difference between right-wing women and feminists is their response to the dangers of being women in a patriarchal culture. Feminists want to change the culture, and stand up strong and safe. Right-wing women want to be protected by men within the dangerous patriarchal culture.

This takes us to one of the volatile areas of discussion in feminism, amongst feminists ourselves, and this goes back to my liberal vs. radical feminisms. The original women's liberation movement and feminism took a good look at the patriarchal culture surrounding us and decided that we wanted to overthrow the system. To use an analogy we are all familiar with (and not because we are domestic goddesses), we didn't want a piece of their pie, we wanted a totally new pie, one that we had a hand in slicing up ourselves. Liberal feminists, or as some call them equity feminists, work for a piece of the patriarchal pie. It's like women being in the Defence Forces, being able to be on the front line.... Congratulations women you can now do what the boys do!...But for radical feminists particularly we don't want the Defence Forces. We don't want the type of world where Defence Forces are necessary. We see them as a symptom of a patriarchal culture. And patriarchal cultures still abound in this world. That's the bad news. We haven't managed to dismantle them yet but given that they have taken centuries and centuries to get to the position they are in at the moment I guess it is asking a lot to have them dismantled in 40 years!

When I was here last time it was September 2001. I left the conference then to spend a week with my daughter and friends in Brisbane and then to a silent retreat in Coolangatta. The retreat started on the 14 September. It was a dramatic week. Ansett collapsed and I lost my ticket home and September 11 went down as perhaps the greatest attack on Western capitalism and imperialism history has seen to date. (and hopefully will ever see... not that I support capitalism and imperialism but because I hope things will just get better and there will be no need for such attacks. Wishful thinking perhaps!). I count my blessings even now that as the retaliation and war talk began I was in retreat...no newspapers, radios or television. No speaking in fact to anyone about anything. It was bliss. It has taken a long time until I could watch or listen to a news program again. I can deal more easily with the newspaper because I can control what I read and it's silent. When I do watch the news reports now I don't like what I see and who does! I see Western governments over-riding truth, thumbing their nose at the United Nations, changing the very rules of conflict...we don't like them, or more to the point, we don't think they like us so let's bomb them! I see countries where it doesn't look like women even live there. I see patriarchal cultures out of control. The United States, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, The

Congo, Liberia, Afghanistan, North Korea, Aceh, the list can go on and on. Men running around with guns, little boys running around with very big guns. And women and children being the majority of the victims of this violence. Closer to home I read about rapes and murders of women daily. I read about inquiries into the institutional abuse and sexual abuse of children that has carried on for decades. I watch our male dominated parliament pontificate and decision make on issues that affect women. Why wouldn't I still be a feminist? How could anyone not be a feminist? The only answer I have to that is if you don't think anything can change, if you don't see that it is patriarchy out of control (and when have we ever seen patriarchy under control I ask myself? Is it even possible?) Then you probably won't call yourself a feminist.

I think about how as feminists we have always said there is no hierarchy of abuse, one is not better or worse than another is, they are all abhorrent. This is how I feel about patriarchal societies. They are all the same. They all have the same face but one has a bigger nose and one has ears that stick out and one has its eyes too close together. But basically they are all the same. George Bush cited the Taliban's treatment of women for one of the reasons the U.S. had to go in there and wage war. He conveniently ignored the treatment and position of the very many women in his own country, bashed and raped daily, impoverished, humiliated and consigned to second class citizen status. And certainly under the Taliban women had no human rights. The Taliban were a feminist's worst nightmare. But they were still just the big nose end of male violence against women, which occurs in all countries where patriarchy flourishes.

Some years ago I was working in a library, the parliamentary library in Canberra actually (a very long time ago!). I worked with a woman who came in one day and spat out her disgust at women in the world who wore the chador, who covered themselves up. My feminist blood rose and I pointed out to her that wearing a chador in one country is the same as wearing make up and high heels in another country. Both would hamper you if you had to run and both are usually a requirement of a patriarchal state not a woman's free choice. It reminds me though of women in Egypt who wear the chador as a political statement, not as a religious duty or because they are required to, but because they don't want to wear the Levi jeans and short skirts of the imperialists. And that is what feminism is about...having the choice. The problem anywhere is when women do not have the choice about the life they lead. A real choice not between options as bad as each other but between life celebrating and life enhancing options. That is what we feminists are struggling for everywhere... the overthrow of patriarchy and true choices for all people.

One of the defining things about patriarchy for feminists is the 'g' word. Gender. So far I have spoken about men running around with power and guns, and women being victims of that. I am aware that there are possibly some people who might think I am saying women are all good and men are all bad. For the sake of my sons and daughters I must acknowledge that Margaret Thatcher was not a strong feminist and others like her do exist. That in some places women also have some guns but in such a miniscule amount and within such patriarchal societies that I do not apologise for excluding them from my discussion. There is no gender equity under a patriarchy and don't they hate it when we keep pointing that out?

Congratulations to the organisers, Queensland feminists and the Queensland government for having the word 'gender' on the second page of this conference program. Gender makes us think about men and women. It makes us think about the differences between us not just our male/female 'sex' differences. It is a highly charged concept. The feminist discussion about gender includes issues about essentialism, and biological determinism. I shan't deal with that today but suffice to

say that feminism provides a multitude of opportunities to think about difference and similarities.

For conservatives gender means affirmative action, dirty words in their language. It means limits to male power and privilege. It has to be got rid of at all costs...So we no longer talk about male violence against women. We de-gender the offender. It's like women do it to themselves. Violence against women...Those women should really stop bashing themselves up! When we don't have gender we don't have any obvious power differentials. We don't have any oppressor, only the victim. Now this might be all well and good if that is what we want to concentrate on. And we have concentrated on that. We have a pretty amazing service system. Yes still with many glitches and not enough, but we do have a system. And feminism played a major role in getting that system set up. In doing so challenging even the language and meaning behind the word 'victim'. Now we not only have shelters, we have specific legislation. We have courts and judges focussed on the issue, we have liaison officers within the police forces, specialist prosecutors, counsellors, court assistants, witness support, evolving models of community support, support groups, housing support, outreach workers and domestic violence workers attached to a range of government and community agencies. Most other agencies, at the least, get training in the issues relating to violence against women. Really we have put a lot of things in place and we can be rightly proud of that...But never complacent. The support system for women and children who have experienced male violence will always be evolving as we learn new methods for best practice responses and as the behaviours in our community change.

Behaviour change. That's where we end up when we just focus on the victim. We end up thinking about behaviour change in our society. And that's good, there's no denying that, but it doesn't go far enough. Back to the old pie analogy.... Behaviour change will just give us a piece of the patriarchal pie.

Gender reminds us that there is more to the picture than just the victim. It reminds us that the majority of violence against women is perpetrated by a male usually an intimate male. It reminds us that the male is operating within a patriarchal society and making choices in that context. It reminds us that nothing will change until the patriarchal structures are dismantled. It reminds us that we want a whole new pie, the original pie vision of the women's liberation movement.

Gender is also a form of shorthand for power and control. It reminds us that power and control is concentrated in few hands and invariably those hands are male. I am reminded of this every time I watch the news on TV where it is blatantly obvious that there is a disparity in our world. You watch the proceedings of any country's legislature and the screen goes black and white as the suits form together creating a barrier to any who dare dress differently. And then as they make their pronouncements and do their deals I am reminded that I am watching gender at work. And I am aroused to anger and action and turn off the TV! And of course that disparity is not just in the governments but in many of the other societal structures around us.

Without gender we would not have an effective and appropriate service system. When we know that the majority of women who have experienced violence have experienced male violence we can provide a relevant response. If we thought that the majority of women who had experienced violence had experienced violence from another woman our response would be quite different.

When one ignores gender it is much easier to concentrate on the small picture. To just see the successes of feminism, as already outlined in our innovative service response system. But, and I say this very respectfully, this is the bandaid end. For

those who don't want to lift their gaze any higher it is at this point that they start talking about post feminism. Even the Prime Minister used this term when he was responding to Pru Goward's maternity allowance proposals. What is post feminism? It must be the time when we are no longer required, when we have done all that we set out to do, when we become an anachronism. When women like me are told to shut up and get a life, get over it, don't you know women have got it all now? You are not necessary any more. This is just more of their lies. They try to blind us with their logic and words and reality. They try to get us to keep our eyes down, to feel fulfilled, because when we look up we see that we have hardly started to make a difference, that there is a lot of power to dismantle - but guess what? They want to keep it. It suits them just fine thank you very much.

So this is why we have to 'reclaim' feminism, reclaim it from their definition that would send us all home thinking the job has been done. We have to reclaim it in order to keep on doing the job. In reclaiming it we need to give it space to move and change. Things have changed since the 1960s and 1970s and 1980s and even the 1990s. We middle aged intransigent feminists have to listen to the young women and maybe let go of some of our ingrained ideas...although I can't imagine what they are! What we can't do though is let anyone tell us that we are 'post' feminism, that being a feminist is old hat. We have to encourage all women to look up. We have to encourage all men to look up with us and to see the reality of patriarchy and to see that we can change it, that there is a better way for all of us. Sure that will mean less privilege for the privileged but they (and we) can cope with that if it means true equality for all of us in this world.

Feminism is big enough for all of us. No longer is it seen as a white women's movement. There are feminists in every country. There is no one 'feminism' to which everyone swears an oath of allegiance but there are some basic principles which we all share. For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women feminism may mean something different. Gender may also mean something different as they deal with the results of colonisation on their men and in their communities. Feminism is about the big picture and there is room for everyone. We just need to remember that feminism is more than the brickwork in the shelter, it is about the brickwork in our cultural psychology and cultural spaces. It is big! Working towards big changes on a day to day basis.

And if we look around and see the successes to date we can take heart and continue the struggle. If we be realistic about the time frame we are dismantling then we can see that it probably won't be in our lifetime but maybe in our grandchildren's lifetimes that patriarchies will fall. They are already crumbling, blocks falling off all over the place. Who could imagine 40 years ago that the Governor General of Australia would be brought down by a child sexual abuse scandal? That it would be debated in Parliament. We did that. Feminists did that. The Pope made a statement about sexual abuse because of us! The churches in western countries are reeling from the disclosures of men and women abused within their houses. Feminism did that.

There are times when I feel overwhelmed and despairing, when we all feel overwhelmed and despairing I am sure. In the 1990s Hester Eisenstein, a feminist thinker and activist, put forward the case for feminist optimism. I think it is worth revisiting that idea. She said that 'a decision for optimism is part of a commitment to ensuring a particular outcome. A commitment to optimism itself is a feminist political stance, a belief in the future in order to try and ensure that a future is possible.' (Eisenstein, 1991, p. 73) She says that her 'sense of optimism is linked to a sense of history and to the place of the movement for women's rights within a historical framework. One can only be optimistic about feminism...by taking a very long view and by measuring the distance that women have come against the

distance that they have had to travel' (p. 74). She lists many of the successes of feminism - the anti-discrimination legislation and agencies, equal employment opportunity measures, legal reforms, the service system I have already acknowledged, women's access to education and training. She says community attitudes towards sexuality have become more tolerant, and the level of debate concerning previously taboo subjects like incest, abortion, prostitution and homosexuality has become more sophisticated. She cites the growth of women's contributions to culture in areas of film, literature and theatre and the media and the intellectual impact of feminism on academia in particular. She says that the impact of feminism has been worldwide and that in Nairobi in 1985 it was evident that the ideas and aspirations of feminism were now the property of women in most parts of the world who were commencing to shape a feminist agenda within the terms and requirements of their own life situations.

She argues that 'in order to bring to fruition the changes we seek as feminists in our social and political life, one thing about the standpoint of women that is worth preserving and cultivating is our 'clearsighted cheerfulness', that is, our optimism. One way to put this into practice is to take account of the achievements of the women's movement as they occur and measure these not against the rest of what needs to be accomplished but against the strength of the obstacles overcome to date.' (p. 85)

Now I don't know if she was falling into a biological determinism trap citing our clear sighted cheerfulness. I am sure her explanation for this standpoint is adequate to ward off the gender police. But I do think that it is important for us to be optimistic, and her words certainly help me get a clearer perspective on that. I urge you all to embrace optimism, to reclaim feminism, to reclaim gender and to smash the patriarchy!

- 1) *Eisenstein, Hester. Gender Shock: Practising feminism on two continents, Allen & Unwin, 1991.*