

Thanks must be given by me to Rabbi Elton and Ros Fischl who have both provided information to me for preparation of this talk on IWD.

8 March

On Tuesday 8 March we will be celebrating globally International Women's Day (IWD), an annual event to commemorate the cultural, religious, political and socio economic achievements of women.

What are the markers?

If we have to set markers for women in recognition of the celebrations, what would we write up as part of the history and the wish list achievements? The suggestion box would include:

- **The absence of violence both sexual and physical against women**

Ask Brittany Higgins and Grace Tame to determine how Australia may be travelling on this

- **Equal opportunity for women to seek employment and recognition of their work**

Is this the moment that I recall that on 1976 my boss asked me to make coffee. For this I had studied at university for 6 years. I bet no male solicitor would have been asked to do this.

- **Compensation equal to men for similar work performed in similar conditions**

In Australia the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's 2020/2021 employer census has revealed that the gender pay still exists in this country with women still receiving \$25.8k less on average than men

- **Religious equality**

How have we succeeded on this if we have on one end of the spectrum the circumstances of the argunot, the chained women, who are unable to gain a Jewish divorce because of the refusal of a husband to grant this.

We have a number of female rabbis both in Progressive Synagogues and Rabbinat Judith Levitan, an Orthodox rabbi who is also a lawyer with over 15 years' experience in the social justice system.

In non Jewish religions women are also ministers.

In the Great Synagogue we have been innovative in that:

- It has been the first Orthodox synagogue to elect a women president
- First Synagogue to permit girls to celebrate a Bat Mitzvah on Shabbat
- The Torah is carried up to the women's gallery
- The introduction over 20 years ago of a women's shabbat

- **Equal legal recourse for any and all acts of discrimination**

This is an essential ingredient of the justice system that should be available to whoever and whenever to enforce rights and responsibilities

The right to prosecute claims in a timely manner should be available no matter whether men, women or in today's age a third gender

- **Access to education equal to that offered to boys and men**

The benefit here is that:

- women are able to make better choices in lifestyles for themselves and their families
- improved decision making
- education builds stronger families and economies
- provides women with greater confidence
- develops skillsets and capabilities

- **The right to vote which was so hotly contested that we now take for granted**

Australia was the first country in the world to give most women the right to vote and to allow them to stand for positions in the Commonwealth government

Development of recognition of women and their status

But we need to start from the beginning to see that the recognition of women and women's rights have inched forward slowly in history.

A brief summary of International Women's Day will include that:

- It originated from labor movements in North America and Europe during the early 20 century.
- In **1908**, 15,000 women marched through New York seeking shorter working hours, better pay and voting rights.
- On **28 February 1909** a "Women's Day" event was organized by the Socialist Party of America in New York city.
- In **1910** over 100 women from 17 countries who represented unions, socialist parties and working women's clubs attended an International Socialist Women's Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark. It was at this time that a resolution was passed that a special Women's Day would be organized annually.
- In **1911** in Austria, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland over 1 million women and men attended rallies campaigning for women's rights to work, to be trained, to hold public office and to end discrimination.
- In **1917** IWD was made a national holiday on a specific set date of 8 March that would be celebrated by the socialist movement and communist countries.
- IWD remained predominantly a communist holiday until about **1967** when it was adopted by the global feminist movement.
- **1975** the UN began celebrating IWD and proclaimed that year to be International Women's Year.
- **1977** IWD was adopted by the United Nations as an official UN holiday for women's rights and world peace.

What are the recent milestones?

Has there been any demonstrable achievement in the improvement of the status and position of women? The answer is really one step forward and many steps back, for example:

Let's look at some of the positives:

- In **2010** the International Committee of the Red Cross drew attention to the hardships that displaced women endure.
- In **2011** President Obama proclaimed March 2011 to be “Women’s History Month” calling on Americans to reflect on the extraordinary accomplishments of women.
- In **2011** Australia issued an IWD 100th anniversary commemorative 20 cent coin: *women are only worth 20 cents?*
- In **2012** Oxfam America invited people to celebrate inspiring women by sending a free International Women’s Day e card or honoring a woman whose efforts had made a difference in the fight against hunger and poverty.
- In **2013** The International Committee of the Red Cross drew attention to the plight of women in prison.
- In **2017** the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres commented that women’s rights were being reduced, restricted and reversed. With men still in leadership positions and a widening economic gender gap he called for change which was to be achieved by empowering women at all levels, enabling their voices to be heard and giving them control over their own lives and over the future of our world.
- In **2019** the UN theme for International Women’s Day was: *Think equal, build smart, innovate for change*. This was intended to advance gender equality and the empowerment of women.
- In **2020** despite the covid pandemic, street marches occurred in various cities around the world such as London, Paris, Madrid, Brussels and Moscow in support of IWD.

- In **2021** the theme for IWD was: *Women in leadership: achieving an equal future in a covid 19 world.*

On the flip side, let's look at the negative treatment of women:

- **2011** in Egypt in Cairo hundreds of men came out not to support but rather to harass the women who came to stand up for their rights. The police and the military stood by watching the harassment. State sanctioned violence.
- In **2020** the march on IWD in Islamabad was marred by stone throwers after a failed attempt to have the march banned as Un Islamic.
- In **2020** in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, police detained dozens of marchers shortly after masked men reportedly attacked the marchers.

High achievers

Let's look now at the women.

a) Employment

In Australia women are not shy, they are today empowered and achieve in such positions as:

- University lecturers who also head up the various university departments
- Lawyers (solicitors, barristers), judges, magistrates
- Doctors, nurses, teachers
- We have had a Prime Minister when Julia Gillard took office from 2010 to 2013
- Two State Premiers
- One Governor General: Quentin Bryce: lawyer, educator and politician
- Her Excellency The Professor The Honourable Dame Marie Bashir, the first female governor of NSW, the former and second longest serving Governor of NSW, Dame of the Order of Australia, Companion of the Order of Australia, Commander of the Royal Victorian Order, Chancellor of the University of NSW, psychiatrist and proficient violinist
- The current Governor of NSW: Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley, Companion of the Order of Australia, Officer of the Order of Australia, Dame of Grace of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, Queens Counsel, Governor of NSW in the Commonwealth of Australia, a former Judge of the Supreme Court of NSW and President of the Court of Appeal

b) Honours

We see that women are recognized in the Queen's Birthday Honours lists for services in various facets of public life for example Dr Suzanne Rutland, Professor Emeritus from Sydney University, whose service to education including Jewish education was recognized with an OAM.

This Schule is lucky enough to boast of at least 6 such women recipients of an OAM:

- Ros Fischl as the first female President of an Orthodox synagogue and for Jewish Communal leadership (inaugural President of Council of Orthodox Synagogues of NSW)
- Lea Portrate for services to the community as a volunteer
- Ruth Lillian for services to the meetings and events industry and specialist medical societies and communities
- Zara Young whose achievements include (but in fact exceed) her services as a volunteer and fundraiser of many charities, Board of Governors of JCA
- Sari Browne, the first woman Board Member here at the Great Synagogue, for services to National Council of Women and Legacy
- Anna Marks

In recognition we must not omit:

- Susan Bures, administrator of this Schule and former editor of the Australian Jewish news, who received an AM for her contribution to the arts, youth, multiculturalism and the Jewish community.
- Lisa Jackson Pulver: a Jewish Koori woman who is the first Indigenous person to receive a PHD in medicine, Deputy Vice Chancellor of Indigenous Strategy and Services at the University of Sydney and first female president of Newtown Synagogue

c) Positions within the Great Synagogue

Let us also remember the former Vice President of this Synagogue, Caroline Lewis and the current Vice President Lauren Ryder, both women who have provided such assistance without hesitation in the ongoing demands of decision making. Let us also thank the women in our

congregation who step up continuously in whatever capacity to facilitate and manage behind the scenes the various committees as volunteers.

Jewish women in history

Where do we start to discuss specifically the contributions of Jewish women apart from the Great Synagogue women?

- On a weekly basis in prayer we refer to the quintessential women and the founding mothers, the matriarchs of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.
- We read in Exodus about Miriam the sister of Aaron who leads the women with her timbrel in singing and dancing and is looked upon as a prophetess.
- Annually we read at Purim about Queen Esther, the Jewish Queen of the Persian King Ahasuerus, who alerted the Jews to a proposed coup against them and foiled a plot of destruction of all Jews. A symbol of freedom.
- In Israel women are obliged to undertake duties as part of the military force in attending national service. They serve with pride to defend a nation. They too are high flyers in their own right even if they do not receive an OAM.
- In the past few weeks Israel has appointed Gali Baharav-Miara as the first woman to be the Attorney-General having worked in the civil division of the State Prosecutor's office for 30 years. Her appointment was not on the basis that she is a woman but rather that it was recognized that she was the best candidate for the job.
- Last but definitely not least, Israel appointed in 1969 Golda Meier as the fourth Prime Minister. This was somewhat revolutionary in timing but what a marvelous job she undertook until 1974.

Summary:**a) Matrilineal society**

Let us not forget that Orthodox Judaism depends on fundamentals recognizing that the religion operates within a matrilineal society. Our religion depends on the women. They are in their own right high flyers as sisters, partners, wives, mothers and carers. They are the glue that sticks the family members together. They run the household ensuring that the home life ticks along. The children are nurtured.

The patriarch is able to go to work, to Synagogue and is the public face of the family. The women are just as integral in the division of labour. This is another example of family equality where in Proverbs a wife/mother is valued far above rubies.

b) Purpose of IWD: honouring women

We need an International Women's Day to remind the world of our worth, of our right to aspire to absolute equality.