

Wearing red

BRONWYN STEVENS

I began teaching in country NSW in 1972. Although the marriage bar had been removed, married women were still subject to practices that limited their career prospects. Married women were discouraged from applying for permanent positions on threat of being posted anywhere in NSW. Superannuation was limited and promotion prospects undermined. The impact of these discriminatory practices was embedded into the new ACT system.

When the ACT system formally commenced in January 1974 it retained NSW staff, but a new cohort of well credentialed staff was recruited. The system did away with some of the regressive practices. Married women were appointed to permanent positions but the implicit bias in favour of males in leadership positions lingered and was illustrated in many ways.

Principals' positions were almost exclusively held by men and implicit bias and informal procedures continued to hamper women's progress. Most obvious was the practice of appointing men to act in more senior positions, depriving women of leadership experience and disadvantaging women's career progression. This was something I observed during my first appointment in the ACT when a conscientious and experienced woman was passed over for a younger male, 'a good bloke' but not one known for excessive devotion to duty.

Sadly, these attitudes were also still apparent in the ACT Teachers Federation where leadership positions were male dominated and women had difficulty getting issues of concern to them on the agenda. Women gradually increased their numbers on council and began to caucus and explore ways to get the issues concerning women members onto the agenda. Council meetings were held one Saturday morning a month.

There was usually a full agenda of industrial issues and occasionally important international issues, but the meetings were also taken up with highly peripheral issues particularly from a small but tightly organised group known as 'The Trots' who knew how to catch the chair's attention and got motions on 'the need to commence a universal strike to bring down the government' into debate much to the exasperation of most members.

To participate effectively on council women delegates had to learn to overcome years of conditioning to be polite. We were advised to leap to our feet quickly to have a chance of being recognised by the chair. Wearing red was also advised.

It became clear that it was essential to understand the meeting rules including 'that the motion be put' if we were to get issues of concern to our school staff and specific issues relating to women members heard. Issues like access to act in more senior positions, and the application of maternity leave provisions.

One issue that I participated in was the right for teachers to return to their appointed school after maternity leave. After teachers had gained the right to return to their appointed school after a year's leave without pay for travel or study purposes, a proposal to extend this to return from maternity leave was met with some resistance.

While lobbying, I was amazed to hear from one principal a range of allegations that were as outmoded as they were untrue: women would be worrying about their children not focusing on their jobs, would always be taking sick leave and, perhaps strangest of all, particular mention was made of the inability to concentrate while on playground duty.

Turning to a senior staff member who was also a senior union representative for support provided no help. It became clear that more specific formal recognition of the rights and

interests of women teachers in the ACT Teachers Federation was required if their issues were to be put forcefully to the ACT Schools Authority.

It is pleasing to hear accounts from current women members that indicate the union recognises issues that specifically affect women and advocates strongly on their behalf.