

AN ADDRESS TO THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY GALA DINNER 28 JUNE 2003

# A BRIEF AND VERY UNCRITICAL HISTORY OF AWE 1983-1987

by Leonie Daws

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**LEONIE DAWS** started her teaching career in secondary schools in Victoria and moved from there into teacher education in the early 70s.

Leonie was a full-time co-ordinator for two years for AWE in the 1980s, and subsequently served a term as chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gender Equity in Queensland and directed the Centre for Policy and Leadership Studies in the Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology in the 1990s.

Leonie took an early 'retirement' package from QUT in 2000 and now operates as an independent consultant providing training and advice in the use of qualitative data analysis software. She is currently based in Rockhampton.

### Origins of the Association

The origins of the Association of Women Educators lie in the Bjelke-Petersen era of Queensland's political history. Henry and Taylor [1: 103] write of this period:

*In Queensland there was a deliberate refusal throughout the years of the Bjelke-Petersen government to recognise the educational disadvantage of girls. Despite a policy statement in 1981 entitled "Equal Opportunity for Girls and Boys" the government provided no financial commitment for staff or resource materials in the area, and consistently opposed any initiatives which specifically focused on improving the situation for girls.*

Federal government funding, made available through the intersystemic Queensland In-service Education Committee (QInSEC), included the requirement that programs address identified disadvantaged groups including girls. The Queensland government's refusal to direct funds to this purpose prompted the formation of the Association of Women Educators as a means of accessing funds and providing appropriate in-service training. Jenny Hughey [2], who was Women's Co-ordinator with the Queensland Teachers' Union (QTU) at the time, recalls:





*The formation of the Association was... a direct result of limited funds coming from the In-service Committee which could not be convinced by either Bob White (QTU) or Maria O'Neill (Queensland Association of Teachers in Independent Schools—QATIS) to allocate any further funding for sexism in education seminars to the QTU. I then talked with Maria and that is how the first meeting came about... it was attended by women from both Union's 'women's' committees. The Unions supported the original organisation in its establishment with material provisions and assistance from various officers.*

The Minutes of the Inaugural Meeting of the Association of Women Educators, held on 26 October 1983, do not record those in attendance but the list of those named for executive positions gives some indication of the breadth of representation. It includes women from both QTU and QATIS as well as women from local tertiary institutions:

**Conveners:** Barbara O'Rourke, Viki Rutter

**Executive Committee:** Eileen Duhs, Margaret Hardy, Nicky Hock, Jenny Hughey, Belinda Kelly, Mary Kelly, Brigid Limerick, Maria O'Neill, Barbara O'Rourke, Viki Rutter, June Walker, Marilyn Willis

**Newsletter Sub-Committee:** Rosemary Boys, Mary Dale, Julie Dickinson, Viki Rutter

**In-Service Sub-Committee:** Eileen Duhs, Glynnis Gartside, Linda Oakley, Maria O'Neill, Pam Verney.

While this first meeting was predominantly occupied with the formalities of establishing the Association, such as agreeing a constitution and appointing office bearers, the members were very soon actively and successfully seeking funding to further the Association's aims which were:

- Promotion of the education of women and girls.
- Work to reduce all forms of sexism from curriculum and all educational institutions.
- Encourage and support women effectively pursuing their careers in education and seeking promotion within education systems.
- Encourage and support women in the decision-making processes in all education systems at all levels.

To do this, the Association planned to:

- Provide a state-wide network amongst women educators,

including the development of an information bank.

- Facilitate communication, eg. newsletters, magazines.
- Design and facilitate in-service projects (seminars).
- Respond to relevant issues as they arise.

(Extracts from AWE Constitution adopted 26 October 1983).

Within six months, on 31 March 1984, the Association received notification that it had been granted \$23,553 to mount a series of two-day regional seminars. The first of these, held at Richlands State High School on 7th and 8th May 1984, brought together a group of women who were to form the backbone of the Association for years to come. Subsequently the Association received a further grant of \$10,315 from QINSEC for a part-time consultant to co-ordinate remaining seminars and act as follow-up speaker to interested groups and institutions. This position was filled initially by Trish Hodgson who was responsible for the development of the remaining seminar program in 1984. The consultant also acted as an executive officer for AWE. At the end of that year Trish accepted the position of Assistant Secretary with QATIS and I was appointed to the consultancy position in January 1985 and continued in it to the end of 1986 when funding dried up as a result of changing federal government priorities. This brief account covers this period from the establishment of the Association in 1983 to the turning point reached in 1987 when we were faced with finding ways to continue the Association's activities without the support of funding for in-service programs or a consultant.

### Key activities and people

The Association's key activities during the period 1983 to 1987 included: servicing the needs of members through regular meetings and the production of a newsletter; mounting a series of in-service activities and providing consultancy on the education of girls and women across Queensland supported by QINSEC funding; and, undertaking other specific projects from time to time such as the *Queensland Women's Non-traditional Work Register Project*.

### AWE meetings

One of the central ways of servicing the needs of members has been the Association's regular meetings. The format quickly evolved as monthly meetings divided between an executive meeting, which occupied the first hour and dealt with the



essential business of the Association, and a general meeting offering some special activity of interest to members and others. The following extracts from Minutes of meetings are indicative of the climate in which the Association operated, and the achievements of its members.

B. O'Rourke brought up a problem with the latest edition of *Quest*, particularly cutting of Sandra Taylor's article and heavy censorship of articles on girls and education. Censorship also of any mention of worthwhile union work in the area of non-sexist education (Executive Meeting, 31 January 1985). An account of this episode has been published by Lingard, Henry and Taylor [4].

Agreed to send a letter of congratulations to Mary Kelly on her success in the QTU presidential election (Executive Meeting, 14 November 1985).

Chris Brennan reported that girls at Wellers Hill State School are now allowed to use the oval (Executive Meeting, 13 November 1986).

The diversity of interests of members and their dedication to broadening their understanding of the issues is evident in the following list of speakers and topics presented at general meetings in 1985-1986:

- **Nancy Shelley**, mathematics expert from Canberra spoke on girls and mathematics (12 September 1985). **Paula Kelly**, Victorian activist, spoke on young women in prison (10 October 1985). **Jenny Hughey**, QTU Women's Officer and foundation member of AWE, reported on her attendance at the Nairobi gathering for the United Nations *End of the Decade for Women Forum* (14 November 1985). **Quentin Bryce**, newly appointed head of the Women's Information Service, discussed the federal *Affirmative Action* legislation and its implications for Queensland

educational institutions (10 July 1986). **Marlette Black**, principal of St Rita's College Clayfield and **Janey O'Shea**, lecturer at McAuley College, led a workshop on the spiritual dimension of women's lives (14 August 1986).

- **Marg O'Donnell**, Human Rights Commission officer, discussed the position of teachers and students in Queensland schools with respect to sexual discrimination and harassment (9 October 1986).
- **Leonie** (me!!!) led us in a musical reflection on the State of Queensland, our achievements and goals still to be won (13 November 1986).

### The Consultancy (1984-1986)

The consultancy played an important part in establishing the Association in this formative period in at least two ways. First, the availability of a consultant to respond to requests from school personnel and other members of the community, regardless of education system, regional location or level of schooling, provided a very visible presence for the Association in the Queensland education community. The extracts from my diary for 1985 (**Table 1**) are indicative of the range of ways in which people took advantage of access to this resource.

This exposure, together with the series of seminars which the Association conducted between 1984 and 1986, helped to build membership of the Association both in Brisbane and in regional Queensland.

The second significant contribution of the consultants to the early establishment of the Association was through their service as Executive Officer to the Association. We handled correspondence, maintained membership records, kept minutes of meetings, supported the production and distribution of newsletters and generally acted as a point of contact for members and those wishing to join or take part in Association activities.

### The AWE seminars

Apart from their direct contribution to the early growth of the Association, the other major role of the consultants was developing and managing three programs of QINSEC-funded seminars. The real success of these seminars, however, derived from the broadly based enthusiasm, dedication and expertise of the Association's members. This was most evident in the



number of members who made themselves available to provide leadership, and the diversity of topics and expertise that they offered, for the *Girls in Education* seminars.

### ***Girls in Education* seminars (1984-85)**

The *Girls in Education* seminars were the first in a series of three seminar programs run by the Association with QINSEC funding. They were intended to raise awareness of issues affecting girls in education, and to support teachers and parents to develop responses to these issues.

The first seminar, conducted over two days at Richlands

State High School (Brisbane), was my first contact with the Association. I was inspired by the quality of the presentations and workshops and challenged by the issues they raised.

I learned, too, of the very real challenges facing the Association as the seminar was also well attended by representatives of a right wing group whose primary goal was to keep the Bjelke-Petersen government informed about all such 'subversive' activities. This group had already succeeded in having a range of books and educational programs banned from Queensland state schools.

**Table 1:** Extract from Consultant's Diary 1985

DATE	EVENT	LOCATION
8 March	Address to non-government schools PEP Officers	Participation and Equity Office
11 March	Non-government Schools PEP Conference	Banyo Seminary
19 March	Self-esteem for Year 7 Girls: Parent workshop	St Patrick's School, Gympie
22 & 23 March	Girls in Education Seminar	Townsville District Education Centre
28 March	Women and Work Conference	Cultural Centre, South Brisbane
2 April	Brisbane North Regional In-Service Planning Meeting	W H Hooper Centre, Brisbane
11 April	Sexism in the primary school: address to staff	Burleigh Heads State Primary School
17 April	QMCC Statewide Officers and Personnel	Kangaroo Point
23 April	Sex stereotyping in early childhood: address to parents	Marsden Pre-school
2 May	Equality of Opportunity Seminar	Park Royal Hotel
7 May	Interview with Jan Culla—Case Study	McGregor State High School
20 May	Meeting with Adrienne McDarra—Longreach	QATIS Office
21 May	Girls and maths: Loretto and All Hallows staff	Xavier College, Indooroopilly
24 & 25 May	Gaining Ground Seminar: Brisbane regions	W H Hooper Centre
27 May	QINSEC Equity Conference	Broadbeach
29 May	International Youth Year Education Sub-committee	Commonwealth Govt. Office, Brisbane
2 June	Issues in Education QTU Seminar	Bardon Professional Development Centre
3 June	Girls and Maths Seminar: Charters Towers Schools	Mt Carmel College, Charters Towers
4 June	Non-government Schools PEP: New Schools Seminar	Townsville
6 June	Girls and Maths Seminar	Townsville District Education Centre
7 & 8 June	Gaining Ground Seminar	Townsville District Education Centre



Names from this list of presenters, and of other participants in this seminar, turn up repeatedly in lists of office bearers, volunteers for the various tasks that keep such an organisation alive and other records of attendance over the next four years, providing evidence of the significance of such events in establishing networks and building support for improvements in the education of girls across the educational community.

Subsequently, a concentrated version of this first seminar was developed and delivered in regional centres across Queensland.

The sessions offered varied according to the leadership team available for any given centre, but the following sessions formed the core of the regional programs:

- Classroom interaction;
- Sex role stereotyping in primary schools;
- Girls' self esteem and achievement;
- Girls and physical activity;
- Media images of women;
- Women and knowledge;
- Education and career outcomes;
- What to do in schools;
- *Rosie the Riveter/For Love or Money* (Films).

While the Association's focus was primarily on developing constructive programs to advance the interests of girls, the headlines chosen by regional newspapers when reporting on these seminars, and other AWE activities, are indicative of community attitudes and limited knowledge of the issues at the time. All but one of these headlines still manage to emphasise the place of boys in education, even when this includes a negative portrayal such as the reference to male chauvinist piglets.

#### **Gaining Ground: Skills workshops (1985-86)**

Following on from the success of the *Girls in Education* seminars, the Association again applied to QINSEC for funding to provide professional development on issues affecting girls and women in education across Queensland. The focus of the second round of seminars was on building the skills of personnel in the regions to develop and deliver professional development specifically addressing local concerns. The *Gaining Ground* workshops were underpinned by educational

principles that were seen to be consistent with feminist understandings of sound adult learning principles. These included:

- developing an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and community in the learning situation;
- shared leadership;
- co-operative structures;
- integration of cognitive and affective learning; and,
- action.

The workshops consisted of four sessions spread across two days with the intended outcome of developing specific plans for actions to be undertaken in the local region.

The first session explored participants' expectations and established priorities. Groups were then formed to work on the identified priorities. In the second session the groups researched their chosen issue, drawing on an extensive portable library of resources accumulated by AWE. The results of this research then informed the development of an action plan in the third session. The final session was devoted to evaluation, both of the interventions they had developed, and of the success of the *Gaining Ground* workshops. A workshop package was developed to support this process, containing a detailed outline of the program, a set of resources, a booklet with practical activities for action plans, and a set of readings elucidating the feminist underpinnings of the workshop.

Other resources developed as the workshops progressed including a catalogue of the resources held by AWE, and a booklet to assist regional personnel to develop submissions for QINSEC funding. This latter initiative was in response to feedback that regional in-service personnel were not informing schools of the availability of funding for girls' education and that funds allocated for this purpose were being reallocated to other activities because of the lack of applications.

Once again workshops were conducted in major regional centres in 1985-86: Brisbane, Townsville, Cairns, Maryborough, Rockhampton, Toowoomba and Mt Isa. Outcomes from these workshops included action plans addressing a range of issues perceived as important in the regions and included community involvement, staff and parent awareness,





classroom dynamics, self-esteem and careers for girls.

One interesting development was the number of participants expressing concern about the degree of backlash they were experiencing when they attempted to place girls and education on the agenda in their schools. This was reflected in groups from two regions, Rockhampton and Townsville, developing action plans for dealing with negative attitudes and opposition.

Evaluations from this round of seminars generally reflected an enthusiastic response to the workshops, particularly the processes used:

*Really enjoyed the seminar because of the process. Getting various people to be facilitators/time keepers was a great way to involve everyone. Liked the flexibility of the program, a pleasant change from previous conferences where you just take in information but aren't really involved in the process.*

*Workshop design was an added plus—giving us a model for future workshops.*

### **Subject and Professional Associations seminar series (1986)**

As 1985 progressed, it became clear that government priorities were changing, and that funding for the kind of centrally planned regional professional development activities that had been supported in 1984 and 1985 would not be maintained. The Association explored other strategies for ensuring the ongoing availability of professional development and support for those in schools working to improve the situation of girls and women. It was decided that this could be most effectively achieved by directing our efforts to the various subject and professional associations who regularly provided professional development and support to their membership, ensuring that issues affecting girls and women were clearly on their agenda. To this end, AWE sought QINSEC funding once more for a series of seminars targeting subject and professional associations, intended to raise awareness of the issues and canvas a range of responses most relevant to the ongoing interests and activities of these associations, such as curriculum and classroom practices. The outcome was a program of three consecutive seminars, all conducted in

Brisbane:

- **Education of girls:** raising awareness of the issues;
- **Curriculum renewal:** including the experiences of women;
- **Classroom interaction:** responding to the different needs of girls.

An evaluation of the Association's activities undertaken in the latter half of 1986 [3] notes that this series of seminars was less successful than the two previous seminar programs. Possible explanations for this included communication channels within professional associations not providing information to potentially interested members, lack of recognition of the relevance of the issue of education and girls to the associations, and the belief that seminars organised for a general audience would have little to offer a specific subject association.

### **Queensland Women's Non-traditional Work Register (1986)**

The other major initiative of AWE in 1986 resulted from a proposal brought to the Association by a group of students from the University of Queensland. They wanted to develop a register of women in non-traditional work. The Association agreed to sponsor this initiative and successfully applied for funding through the *Community Employment Program* that provided wages for projects offering positions to long-term unemployed people. Four young women were employed under this scheme. Working under AWE's supervision, they:

- developed a database of women in non-traditional work;
- generated publicity for the register through the press, newsletters and social functions;
- conducted training seminars to encourage and support women in non-traditional employment to make themselves available as guest speakers to support school career education programs; and
- staffed a *Careers Week* stall.

They also developed a series of posters depicting young women in a range of non-traditional occupations, and printed 'Girls Can Do Anything' stickers that were soon sported on many AWE car bumpers. Their report at the end of 1986 records that over 200 women had applied for inclusion on the register, and that the register had been accessed by TAFE



and Commonwealth Employment Service staff as well as a number of schools.

### A crisis of commitment

At the end of 1986 the anticipated change of government priorities took effect, closing off the Association's access to a regular source of funding for in-service and consulting activities. Up to that time, the Association had been successful in accessing around \$105,000 through QINSEC, which constituted almost the entire allocation for centrally funded *Girls in Education* activities. This funding was central to the Association's capacity to provide such services and the drying up of this funding source forced the Association to seriously reassess its future. This occurred at a time when the members were also facing increasing challenges within their own employment contexts, including increasing demands to engage with the issues and a growing backlash that led some to feel discouraged and disillusioned. Numbers attending meetings were decreasing and fewer people were willing to accept positions of responsibility within the Association. Coinciding as this did with the termination of the consultancy position, resulting in the effective loss of an executive officer, the Association faced a crisis of commitment. In the March-June 1987 Newsletter, the Editorial Collective wrote:

*At the last Executive Meeting, those present decided to put the matter of AWE's future to the Annual General Meeting for consideration. A range of options is presented below...*

1. *Try to continue activities as in the past two years. The loss of the full-time consultant and a smaller active membership in 1987 makes this impossible, but if you believe in miracles, and are committed to seeing them performed, vote for this one.*
2. *A scaling down of operations, eg. focusing on only one or two sorts of activities, such as the newsletter and seminars. This may be possible with a small but committed membership.*
3. *Another reduced operation, which focuses on communication amongst members and embraces activities like production of materials by special interest groups, networking of special projects, ie. being a clearing-house.*
4. *Handing over the whole operation to some other sympathetic organisation, eg. the QUT and QATIS Women's Committees, or the BCAE Studies in Gender Equity In Education Interest*

*Group. This would be a de-facto disbandment of the organisation.*

Feedback from the membership was invited. Subsequently, on 28 April 1987, I circulated *An Open Letter to All Members* setting out the various tasks that had operated to maintain the Association's activities including as convener, treasurer, secretary, membership secretary, co-ordination of resources and sale of materials and production of the newsletter. I commented on a number of measures that had been set up at the beginning of 1987, such as the operation of an answering service through rostered monitoring of an answering machine and processes for the production of the newsletter, noting that volunteers had failed to turn up to fulfil these commitments. I noted also that the past two executive committee meetings had failed to reach a quorum and the last general meeting had been attended by the two presenters and two AWE members. I concluded "...we need to assess accurately what the membership is able to provide in the way of services to members and the public". Subsequently the Annual General Meeting held on 9 July 1987 determined that:

- the Association's accumulated resource materials be donated to QUT library, with the understanding that it would be made available to all members of the Association, not just members of the QUT;
- a newsletter be produced on an occasional basis;
- a roster of monthly dinners be set up to maintain contact between members in Brisbane;
- the Association's finances, membership list and equipment be maintained; and,
- the Women's Information Service be approached to take on the Women and Non-traditional Work Register.

### Reflection

The 1986 evaluation of AWE [3: 4] noted that members identified as a high priority the need for information on issues connected with the education of girls and that "...for many members, AWE is the only source of up-to-date information, facts and figures on female employment, details of events of interest, discussion of equal opportunities policies and ideas for classroom implementation".

The other major contribution of the Association to meeting members' needs noted in that evaluation was the networking





it provided. The report records:

*Many comments refer to the value of the formal and informal networks composed of women who share similar values and who support each other in their commitment for greater educational equality for girls... Few other educational issues seem to generate the hostility and resentment which is sparked by Education of Girls. Those committed to the development of the area have a great need to share their experiences with others who have a similar commitment. [3: 5].*

My perception is that there were some quite distinctive features about the way in which the Association operated in those formative years that were important in its successes. Leadership was shared and there was frequent mutual encouragement for members to take on unfamiliar tasks in a context where they would be supported to develop new skills. The Association at that time was characterised by an informal meeting structure based on consensus decision-making but this was balanced with opportunities to learn formal procedures. The members actively sought to further their own knowledge and understanding of the issues, particularly through participation in general meeting activities, and through their drive to get funding for professional development.

Possibly the most distinctive feature of the Association and a significant contributor to its successes at the time was the creative coalition which gave rise to the Association and characterised its membership. This was the coalition of unions, government and non-government, primary and secondary teachers, school administrators, tertiary educators and education centre personnel. This coalition was a key to the successful networking identified in the evaluation report above, and also to the success on obtaining funding, as members were constantly informed of what was available and what was needed to be successful. The coalition also supported outreach to a broad range of people who benefited from the Association's seminars and other activities. At the end of the day, however, these successes also contributed to the crisis that faced the organisation in 1987 in at least three ways.

First, through the support and encouragement offered by the

Association, women were beginning to climb the slippery promotional ladder that had previously been almost entirely inaccessible. This meant that some of those early willing volunteers were now too busy, or had moved away from Brisbane to take up new positions. Second, the high level of commitment and success, and the resulting backlash from the more conservative forces in the educational community, had led to some degree of burnout amongst the membership. Finally, the success in attracting funding, particularly for the consultancy, had provided the Association with a level of resourcing that enabled it to be highly visible and active. This inevitably resulted in a degree of over-reliance on funded resources—particularly people resources—and a diminishing of volunteer contributions to AWE's activities. Similar phenomena characterised the equivalent movements in other Australian states following the appointment of government-funded equal opportunity units in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

My final reflection, however, is that these early years laid a sound foundation which enabled the Association to survive the 1987 crisis of commitment and to go on to emerge as the strong national organisation that it is today, two decades later.

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