

Judge Rachelle Lewitan AM

Rachelle Lewitan was the first woman to be ever elected to a position on the Victorian Bar Council, the governing body of the profession. Always outspoken but diplomatic, she was instrumental in increasing the profile and respect for women at the Bar. At the same time, she taught at numerous institutions around Melbourne and served on the Council of Monash University.

Recognising the urgent need for a professional body to represent women's interests at the Bar, Rachelle was instrumental in convening the first meeting of Victorian women barristers in 1993. She was promptly elected the inaugural convener of the Women Barristers' Association. There was at the time no equivalent organisation in any other jurisdiction in Australia. It is a reflection of Rachelle's standing at the Bar, as well as her leadership skills, that she steered the WBA through its early years, often in the face of staunch opposition from sectors of the Bar.

As *The Bar News* editors wrote at the time of Her Honour's appointment:

"The Association provided an organisation that was capable of articulating the impediments to women's achievement existing within the Bar's control and effectively to agitate to remove them. Her Honour's role in organising the enthusiasm of members and championing its goals to an organisation, which like all organisations was reluctant to examine its own deficiencies, cannot be underestimated."

During Rachelle's period as Chairperson of the Childcare Committee, the Committee pushed for and obtained a number of amendments to the Bar's rules, importantly establishing a rental subsidy for those with primary care of children. Without this subsidy, many women found it impossible to retain chambers and spend time at home in the months following the birth of a child. The subsidy was and remains a significant factor in stemming the attrition of female barristers from the Bar following childbirth.

While Rachelle was Chairperson of the Equality Before the Law Committee, the Committee obtained important changes to the Rules of the Bar, including amendments to prohibit sexual harassment and appoint harassment conciliators. It also commissioned a watershed report entitled *Equality of Opportunity for Women at the Victorian Bar*. The report became a model for several other jurisdictions to investigate barriers to women's advancement in the legal profession. Several years later the Victorian Bar is still examining and adopting recommendations of that report.

The significance of Her Honour's contribution was summarised by Mark Derham QC in the course of Her Honour's welcome to the Court.

"As a result of this work Your Honour leaves a legacy to the Bar. That is something to which few practitioners can lay claim. And it is something of which you are entitled to be extremely proud. It is something for which we at the Bar are most grateful and it will no doubt provide a great benefit to future practitioners."

Judge Lewitan has been and remains a mentor to junior women at the Bar, and an inspiration to all.