

Three things I learned from Lola Mathews AO

By Rachel Power, NSW WEN member and Economist, Deloitte Access Economics.

Article #8 of the NSW WEN fortnightly blog series in partnership with the NSW Economics Society of Australia and the National WEN.



It's an interesting time to think about women's rights at work. While women are [gaining representation in leadership positions](#) across a range of industries and progress on equal pay continues, [analysis of the household impacts of COVID-19](#) shows that not all work-from-home worlds are equal. Women in Australia were three times as likely to be looking after children full-time on their own during lockdown; and more likely to be completing the bulk of unpaid domestic work while working from home.

In addressing these challenges, it's heartening to remember the progress we have made to improve women's work lives. I recently had the pleasure of reading Lola Mathews' memoir - [Winning for Women](#). It's a personal account of her work to progress the rights of women in Australia across the 1970s -1990s, as she lived through and contributed to reforms that set a new standard for women's role in the modern workplace.

Lola Mathews is a co-founder of the [Women's Electoral Lobby](#) (WEL), a former journalist at the Age, and through her work the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) was a leading advocate for women workers during the era of Accord with the Hawke-Keating Government.

Here, I reflect on three of lessons I took from Mathews' battle to Win for Women – and what they mean for gender equality efforts today.

1. Question the Status Quo

Mathews writes that in the 1970s, *"the participation of married women in the workforce was hotly debated. There was no maternity leave, very little government-subsidised childcare and a ban on part-time work.... Women were missing at the top in all areas of employment"*.

Reading Mathews story reminded me just how far we have come in the last 50 years - and reiterated the impact that reform efforts have had in improving the representation of women across the workforce. While the book provides detailed accounts of the legal reforms required to make these gains, Mathews also includes personal stories, inviting readers to contextualise the reforms within the experience of women at the time. She identifies moments where she questioned the status quo of women's role in Australia's life, and invites her readers to do the same. She recounts an interview she had with the wife of an election candidate in 1969:

"[She] said, 'I couldn't talk to you about anything political, that's a man's job'. I asked her if her husband discussed political or local problems with her, and she said, 'oh no, he has had enough of work when he comes home!' It struck me that Australian women needed liberating."

Mathews' story is repeatedly one of engaging with people on a personal level, and considering the implications of policy for all Australians – and especially women. In what she calls her most controversial article for the Age, she recounts feeding her family of five for a week on \$40 - the amount a family receiving welfare payments had to spend on food. She was prompted by a Federal Minister's comment that the welfare rate was too high, and challenged her readers to assess this claim for themselves. She writes *"it seemed to me this was a women's issue as well as a political one, because it was women who had to feed the family"*. Unfortunately, this effort to question the status quo looks [depressingly familiar](#).

I see the strength of Mathews' character in her ability to challenge the assumptions of the people around her and the systems around her. She did this over and over again at the ACTU, driving progress toward national affirmative action – winning equal pay for nurses and outworkers, fighting for parental leave and superannuation, and running a range of equal pay test cases in industries where women were over-represented and underpaid.

Mathews also challenged the status quo at a granular level - pushing for cultural change around the language used in workplaces. When she started at the ACTU, there were 300 federal awards with discriminatory or gendered clauses, and all were written in male pronouns. Reading about her work to remove unnecessarily gendered language from union communications, I'm reminded that [inclusive language remains an important way](#) to remove bias from today's workplaces.

2. Rewrite the rule book

Mathews wants her readers to see that their political engagement is valuable, and that groups of people can collaborate for long-term, cultural and systematic change.

Following a survey of US politicians' opinions about reforms on issues that predominately affected women, she recounts meeting with a group of 10 women to consider how to raise the profile of similar issues in the 1972 Australian Federal election. The group drew up a list of issues they felt could be solved by legislation - including birth control, childcare, and equality in work and education. This was the beginning of the Women's Electoral Lobby.

They developed a 'Women Voter's Guide' for the election - to encourage voters to ask their candidates, *'Why should women vote for you?'* Over two months, WEL members surveyed candidates across a range of issues, and results were published in the national papers. The Prime Minister at the time scored a 1 out of 40 in the index – mostly because the WEL gave a 0 score for answering questions with the phrase *"ask my [female] secretary"*. Mathews recounts the engagement with this campaign from thousands of women, across all political persuasions – and its role in changing perceptions about what was a political issue.

I reflect on the standard that WEL's voting guides set for considering the impact of policy reforms on women and other marginalised groups, and the importance of a clear evidence base to rewrite the rules about what is important to voters. The WEL continues to publish a [federal election scorecard](#) and the National Foundation for Australian Women publishes an annual [Gender Lens on the Budget](#). Resources like the [Financy Women's Index](#) and WGEA's work to [track the gendered impact of COVID-19](#) help us identify key gaps for reform.

While Mathews reflects that she'd like to see a greater uptake of coordinated, WEL-style lobbying efforts from young women today, I'd point to impact of young women's engagement in campaigns on social media as the 2020 equivalent. In Australia, the #schoolstrike4climate and #blacklivesmatter campaigns are being led by young people, and women campaigners play a key role in applying a gendered lens to these issues.

3. Ask, 'what's next?'

In a move that is fitting given Mathews' passion for social policy reform, her book ends with a list of suggestions for Federal action to support gender equality at work and in the home. They focus on improving gender equity reporting, ensuring access to paid parental leave, flexible work, and childcare; as well as reforms to support work-family balance, and are partly drawn from recent inquiries into [women's economic security](#) and [gender segregation in the workplace](#).

Mathews writes that 40 years on, our focus must now be to shift our cultural attitudes toward work and caring – empowering men, as well as women, to demand a better work-life balance. As part of this, it's time for all of us to rethink the [value we should place on informal care](#) that is so often undertaken by women.

With a quarter of [surveyed Australians](#) wanting working-from-home to remain the norm, here's hoping we can use this shift to *win for workers and for carers*, as part of our economic recovery.