

## Alexandra Gath, 'A Line in the Sandpit: Shifting Attitudes to Women in Teaching and the Teachers' Union, 1968-1989'

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Twenty-four delegates from around the state, three of whom were women, formed the oldest teachers' union in Australia, the Queensland Teachers' Union (QTU), in 1889. Throughout its history, the QTU has been a progressive union, consistently fighting for better conditions for teachers and students, but there was one battle that took close to a hundred years to win, and some would argue that the struggle is still ongoing. The battles for gender equality fought within the Queensland Teachers' Union and by the Queensland Teachers' Union are different things. Traditionally considered one of the few occupations 'genteel' enough for women, the teaching profession has always been populated with both genders.<sup>1</sup> The QTU fought for uniform pay and other equalisers between men and women for many years, but the situation within the QTU itself was less than ideal. While women in schools were being promoted and finally paid equal wages by the late 1960s, women in the QTU were struggling to carve themselves a respected niche. This essay will examine the strange double standard perpetuated by the Queensland Teachers' Union, as it fought for women's rights in the teaching workforce but continued to preserve sexist attitudes within the Union itself.



Queensland teachers march in the 1967 Brisbane May Day Parade.

### **"A Woman's Place is in the Home"<sup>2</sup>**

Prior to the 1960s, there were certain assumptions that were interwoven into society. One such assumption was the expectation that women were temporary workers; upon marriage, women would leave the workforce. Another presumption was that young, single, female teachers would be content with wages approximately 60% of a male teacher's wage.<sup>3</sup> Women teachers were dispensable

<sup>1</sup> Jocelyn Clarke and Kate White, *Women in Australian Politics* (Sydney: Fontana Books, 1983), 90.

<sup>2</sup> Eddie Clarke, "1940-1983," in *Female Teachers in Queensland State Schools: A History 1860-1983*, vol. 3, Historical Perspectives on Contemporary Issues in Queensland Education (Brisbane: Production and Publishing Services Branch, Queensland Department of Education, 1985), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Clarke and White, *Women in Australian Politics*, 90.

and easily transferable; sent “hell, west and crooked” all over the state or sacked at the end of the school year, then re-hired the next year so they wouldn’t be entitled to holiday pay.<sup>4</sup> There had been grumblings about the wage disparity for decades, and the Union had been involved in the fight for equal pay for most of its existence, with few results. Ruth Don, the first female President of the QTU from 1951 until 1953, was involved in equal pay campaigning during her presidency but with little result because “the public wasn’t ready to accept equal pay.”<sup>5</sup> Equal pay remained a contentious issue: “The women were confronted with a battle on two levels: on one level the fight against the employer for wage justice; and on the other, women had to struggle against the entrenched sexism of the union movement.”<sup>6</sup> Some men supported the notion of equal pay, but more resisted the change. Ruth Don worked towards equal pay, only to meet with opposition from many. “[The men of the Union] were against women having equal pay, but I do not think their arguments were terribly sound. It was more a conventional attitude. ‘What do women want all that money for? They’re all single.’”<sup>7</sup> If single female teachers were denied higher wages due to their lack of a family, married female teachers were denied *because* of their family. Married women were thought to have better things to do with their time than teach, and it was compulsory that a woman must resign from teaching upon her marriage –if she did not, she was fired.<sup>8</sup> This continued, unchanged, until 1965, when it became the policy of the Queensland Teachers’ Union that married women should continue to teach. However, married female teachers simply became another pool of dispensable labour. Married women could be fired with just one week’s notice. It became the norm to hire married women just in time for the school year and then fire them before their contract was up, just as the school year ended, thereby denying them holiday pay.<sup>9</sup> In 1963, 329 married female teachers in Queensland spent the Christmas break unsure of whether they would have a job to go back to the following year – and indeed, some did not. Evidence suggests that those who were not reappointed had long-service leave owing to them; therefore they would be left unemployed

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<sup>4</sup> Roberta Bonnin, *Dazzling Prospects: Women in the Queensland Teachers’ Union Since 1945* (Spring Hill, QLD: Queensland Teachers’ Union, 1988), 83.

<sup>5</sup> Gay Gray, “Bumping Against the Ceiling: Female Teachers in Queensland State Primary Schools,” in *Lectures on North Queensland History, No. 5* (Townsville, QLD: Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, 1996), 73.

<sup>6</sup> S. Taylor, “Teachers’ Union Activism for Gender Equity : Social Movements and Policy Processes,” *Australian Educational Researcher* 28, no. 1 (2001): 54.

<sup>7</sup> Bonnin, *Dazzling Prospects*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> John Rockett, “Editorial,” *Queensland Teachers’ Journal* 5, no. 4 (April 22, 1982): 2.

<sup>9</sup> Gray, “Bumping Against the Ceiling,” 66.

for six months, at which point any long-service leave and superannuation that had been accrued, expired, and they were then rehired.<sup>10</sup>

These practices, which did not break any law but made life difficult for female teachers, faced heavy opposition from the Queensland Teachers' Union. In 1967, after nearly 70 years of inconsistent lobbying, women won the right for equal wages, which were implemented in 1968. This was the year that Jack Pizzey, Education Minister from 1957-1968 and Premier from January to August of 1968, died, and Joh Bjelke-Petersen became Premier. The following year, in 1969, married women won the right to permanent jobs at schools.<sup>11</sup> These were great coups for the Queensland Teachers' Union, ones that would change the landscape of teaching in Queensland forever. Equal pay meant that women would seek to gain better conditions generally, such as equal access to superannuation and promotional opportunity. Women now regarded teaching as a career, not as a stopgap until marriage, and would continue to force their way up the promotional ladder as sexist attitudes diminished.<sup>12</sup> The Queensland Teachers' Union had lobbied for nearly seven decades for equal conditions for women despite considerable internal conflict and resistance, but the Union itself retained discriminatory attitudes and a male-dominated internal structure.

### **A Matter of Justice**

When asked whether she thought demanding equal pay and conditions was radical or feminist, Ruth Don responded in the negative, saying, "You look at it from a Union point of view and as a matter of justice the whole time."<sup>13</sup> The Queensland Teachers' Union led the fight for equal pay – or, in Mary Kelly's words, "they led it, they stepped back, they led it, they stepped back, and eventually they led it."<sup>14</sup> This wavering attitude to equal pay and equality for women in general was indicative of internal conflict within the Union. Women, and women's issues, were seen as threatening the internal unity of the QTU and taking the focus away from 'real' issues.<sup>15</sup> In 1983, Carmen Smith, a long-standing female member of the QTU Executive, made a speech regarding the role of women in the QTU. Until the 1970s, only six women had been involved in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>13</sup> Bonnin, *Dazzling Prospects*, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Kelly, *Queensland Speaks*, February 12, 2013, [www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/mary-kelly](http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/mary-kelly).

<sup>15</sup> Anne Horan, "Role of the Women's Co-ordinator," *Queensland Teachers' Journal* 10, no. 2 (February 18, 1987): 17.

the administration of the Union, including herself. The one thing these women had in common was that they were all single, and all willing to work single-mindedly towards a common goal with the QTU; they were “unionists first and women after.”<sup>16</sup> At this point in time, women made up about half of the teachers in Queensland, but only around 40% of the members of the Union.<sup>17</sup> According to contemporary accounts, there was a strong tradition of unstated sexism and patriarchy in the Union.<sup>18</sup> The general consensus among many male employees of the QTU was “if they’re good enough, they’ll make it anyway,” but realistically women usually had to be better than their male counterparts to work at the same level.<sup>19</sup> A former married high school principal, Robin Sullivan, once quipped, “What’s that story about women that have to be twice as smart to get the position that men had?”<sup>20</sup> The late 1970s and into the 1980s was a time when some women in the Queensland Teachers’ Union had reached the end of their tether, and began to work seriously to make the Union a place of equal opportunity, just as the Union had worked to make schools places of equality. In 1982, Margaret Parkinson, another Executive member, wrote to the *Queensland Teachers’ Journal*: “Women are grossly under-represented at all levels of Union activity, particularly at Council and at Officer level. In fact, only one out of the thirteen full-time Officers of the Union is a woman, and on Council 17 out of the 72 delegates are women.”<sup>21</sup> Around the same time, Mary Kelly spoke out about the overwhelming barriers that were in place against women. “The Council is dominated by men and men who have an interest in who gets the jobs because they are largely drawn from their own ranks.”<sup>22</sup> Ann Turner, a member of the QTU and former president of the Bowen branch of the Trades and Labour Council, described a typical Council meeting. “...[I]f a motion is moved by a woman, a good percentage of the Council will not be there to start with, or they get up and leave halfway through, so they do not vote; and the noise level is immense, the shuffling of papers and the talking and moving around the room. They do not do things like that to each other, and the women are treated like second-class citizens.”<sup>23</sup> Some of these self-described feminist

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<sup>16</sup> Carmen Smith, “The Role of Women in the QTU - An Historical Perspective” (QTU Archives, Milton, September 8, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Spaul and Martin Sullivan, *A History of the Queensland Teachers’ Union* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 55.

<sup>18</sup> Bonnin, *Dazzling Prospects*, xviii.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Robin Sullivan, *Queensland Speaks*, September 13, 2010, [www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/robin-sullivan](http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/robin-sullivan).

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Parkinson, “Call for Women,” *Queensland Teachers’ Journal* 5, no. 2 (February 17, 1982): 24.

<sup>22</sup> Bonnin, *Dazzling Prospects*, 189.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 294-295.

members of the QTU commented that the men who opposed feminism were the same men who felt vulnerable around women who were no longer prepared to remain in the background.<sup>24</sup>

### “A Powerful Voice for Justice”?<sup>25</sup>

The “entrenched sexism” of the Queensland Teachers’ Union in the 1970s can be traced through the *Queensland Teachers’ Journal*.<sup>26</sup> Throughout that decade of monthly journals, men were pictured 748 times, while women were pictured only 134 times. Usually, pictures of men were a professional portrait or the pictures were taken at a QTU event where a suit and tie was the standard of dress. Pictures of women, on the other hand, were almost exclusively taken in



The sole portrait of a female in the *Queensland Teachers’ Journals* of the 1970s – Carmen Smith.

the classroom, usually while actively teaching a class. There was only one professional portrait of a female included in the entire decade of journals. The portrait was of Carmen Smith, a longstanding and sole female member of the Executive. By the early 1980s, many women teachers were clearly frustrated at this inequality. An article, written by a female teacher, appeared in the *QTJ* in 1982: “The Union could be a powerful voice for justice for women, but ... there are too many men in the Union who use their positions of power to actively obstruct justice for women .... When will the age of enlightenment dawn on the QTU?”<sup>27</sup> If the *Journal* reflects the internal conflicts of the

Queensland Teachers’ Union, then the moment of change is clearly visible. The 1970s were a decade dominated by men; women were marginalised and pushed to the sidelines. This changed in the early 1980s, when Jenny Hughey became the Union’s first Women’s Officer and Mary Kelly became Vice President in 1983. Jenny Hughey’s role was to increase the activity of women in QTU and raise awareness of women’s issues. The number and quality of articles discussing sexism and women in education dramatically increased from then, and particularly after 1986. A line had been clearly drawn in the sandpit.



<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>25</sup> Sue Gray, “Two Sad Facts,” *Queensland Teachers’ Journal* 10, no. 11 (November 18, 1987): 28.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor, “Teachers’ Union Activism for Gender Equity”, 54.

<sup>27</sup> Gray, “Two Sad Facts,”

## The Line in the Sandpit

A core group of women, including Margaret Parkinson, Carmen Smith, Mary Kelly, Jenny Hughey and others, had carved a niche for themselves within the Union by the early 1980s. They weren't always liked or respected, but they were determined, and it was largely because of these women that the very first Women's Officer was appointed in 1983. A majority of the men in the Union supported this appointment, reportedly because they didn't like to think of themselves as sexist.<sup>28</sup> It was still thought, though, that the Women's Officer would clear up all the women's "little teary problems" and leave the men to get on with the real work of the Union; yet this is not what happened.<sup>29</sup> Women's issues had been pushed to the peripherals, but Jenny Hughey successfully organised the women of the QTU and, slowly but surely, women's issues became 'real' issues. Not all men in the Union opposed these women; indeed, there were some who supported feminism and women's rights, but those who held the power felt the most vulnerable, and reacted as such. As the women mobilised, the situation got worse. In the mid-1980s, Jenny Hughey wrote that "certain women were cold shouldered and more or less bullied out of the Union...It was different for us who were activists. [That] took place in sort of ritualised ways, but for people like [the union officers] that was a daily...low-level harassment..."<sup>30</sup> However, an unnamed source who is a declared supporter of Mary Kelly and her leadership style condemned Jenny Hughey's means of advancing women in the Union. While Mary Kelly was a role model for newcomers – men and women alike – to the Union, Jenny Hughey and her 'radical' methods split opinions. Eventually, the issue became so divisive that gender-tagging was introduced for Executive and official positions.<sup>31</sup> The long and arduous process of supporting and winning women's rights within the Union is one that can be clearly mapped, once again, through the *Queensland Teachers' Journal*. In a change from the 1970s, when female Union members and teachers were scarcely mentioned, , women's issues became a dominant theme of the journal, especially in the years from 1983 until 1987. Between 1970 and 1975, only five articles concerning women or sexism – mostly related to the unfairness of superannuation, as well as the lack of women actively involved in the Union – appeared in the *Queensland Teachers' Journal*. This number rose to 22 between 1976 and 1979. In the 1980s, the number of these articles rose significantly; an entire issue of the *Journal* was

The front cover cartoon of the September 1982 edition of the *QTJ*; it was dedicated to women and sexism in the workplace.

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<sup>28</sup> Taylor, "Teachers' Union Activism for Gender Equity,"

<sup>29</sup> Bonnin, *Dazzling Prospects*, 294.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, "Teachers' Union Activism for Gender Equity," 65.

<sup>31</sup> John Battams, *Queensland Speaks*, January 23, 2014, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/john-battams> .

dedicated to women and sexism, in September 1982. The quality and variety of the articles apparently increased as well as the quantity. It was no longer just female Executive members who were involved in these pieces; female schoolteachers were encouraged to write too. In addition, a greater number of articles for the *Queensland Teachers' Journal* in general were written by women, where in the 1970s, articles had been submitted predominantly by men. In 1982, women made up 58% of the teaching workforce and represented a similar percentage of union members. However, only one of the thirteen full-time Union officers was female, and women were still in the minority on the Executive.<sup>32</sup> In a *QTJ* editorial in April 1982, John Rockett, the General Secretary, wrote that "an examination of employment statistics from the Department of Education and participation levels in QTU affairs gives a gloomy picture of our women members' role and involvement", although conditions were vastly improved compared to the 1970s.<sup>33</sup> In 1986, Mary Kelly became President of the Queensland Teachers' Union – only the second woman ever to hold this office, and the first to undertake it as a paid position. This signalled a change in the QTU: "where women have made it onto the decision-making bodies of the organisation, the culture changes."<sup>34</sup> John Battams, General Secretary of the QTU from 1990 until 2011, stated that Mary Kelly's readiness to mentor and support newcomers represented a strong and positive change in the culture of the QTU.<sup>35</sup> New committees, such as the Sexism in Education Committee, were created during the 1980s in an effort to improve the conditions of female teachers and students in schools – although the SEC was so "overlooked, laughed at and underappreciated" within the QTU that the Committee resigned at the end of 1987.<sup>36</sup> However, the important point here is that women had seized the agency to create such a Committee and attempted to make a difference through it, where five or ten years earlier such a thing would have been unimaginable.

In December 1989, the Labor Party, headed by Wayne Goss, returned to power in Queensland after thirty-two years in opposition. With the change in state government came a change in perspectives of women's advancement. Under Joh Bjelke-Petersen's very conservative regime, feminism was generally resisted in spite of advances made during the federal rule of Gough Whitlam in the early 1970s. The QTU had been at the forefront of fighting for the rights of its

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<sup>32</sup> Mary Kelly, "Women, Work and Unions - 'Back to Basics'," *Queensland Teachers' Journal* 5, no. 6 (June 9, 1982): 9.

<sup>33</sup> Rockett, "Editorial,"

<sup>34</sup> Kate Deverall et al., *Party Girls: Labor Women Now* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 2000), 59.

<sup>35</sup> Battams, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/john-battams>.

<sup>36</sup> Gray, "Two Sad Facts,"

female teachers, but had been more reluctant to do so within the Union itself. By the early 1980s, a core group of women were determinedly carving a niche for themselves. Some, like Jenny Hughey, did this in a way that caused yet more division within the Union; others, such as Mary Kelly, became a role model for women and a prime example that times were changing.<sup>37</sup> In 1968, female teachers won the right to equal salaries; yet, for the first half of the 1970s, women were mentioned only five times in the *Queensland Teachers' Journal*. Robin Sullivan, the first female married school principal in Queensland, struggled against Departmental sexism and preconceptions about females; today, most students and parents accept, without question, single or married women as teachers, principals and administrators.<sup>38</sup> The 1980s, within the Queensland Teachers' Union and the teaching profession, was a transformative decade, and the changes begun then continue to impact positively on female teachers' lives and professional standing.

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<sup>37</sup> Battams, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/john-battams>.

<sup>38</sup> Sullivan, <http://www.queenslandspeaks.com.au/robin-sullivan>.



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