

TIMES HAVE CHANGED

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North Toronto BPW
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Ladies...

At the recent BPW Regional Conference, held in the beautiful Grand Cayman Island, a gala dinner was held in honour of the 85th birthday of BPW International. Delegates from Canada, the United States and many Caribbean islands thought that 85 years was a very long time. Being from Toronto, it did not seem so to me. In our city, we have had business and professional women working in a club to improve their experiences in the workforce since 1910. If your grade-school arithmetic is still intact, you will have calculated 105 years. Those Toronto women were indeed pioneers.

I am not a founding member. President Linda (Rice) would have liked to have invited a founding member to speak to you about 'the good old days' but, as she couldn't find one, she has to settle for me. I am 90 years old but I still have all my marbles...or most of them, anyway...and I have always had a good memory. Tonight, I will tell you about experiences I remember and situations that I remember being told about by my older relatives. I come from a very ordinary family, so their experiences were similar to those of other ordinary folk living here in Toronto.

My mother came from a family of six siblings and my father from a family of five siblings. Nowadays, those would be considered to be large families but, at the time, they were not. It was not uncommon for the woman to give birth a dozen times. There was no effective method of birth control. In fact, it was not until the 1920s that it was even known that a woman's fertility varied over the menstrual cycle. If someone has told my grandmother that, someday, a woman would just have to take a pill to avoid conception, she would have laughed, saying that was about as likely as men walking on the moon! All babies were breastfed, there being no alternative, and nursing continued much longer than is customary today. It was commonly believed that a nursing mother could not become pregnant. As a result, most married women were either pregnant or nursing throughout their fertile years. Obviously, they were not in the workforce.

The women who founded the first BPW Club in Toronto were single women. Let us try to imagine what participation in the paid labour force was like for them in 1910. The vast majority of gainfully employed women worked in a narrow range of occupations; mostly factory work, retail sales or office clerical tasks. The term 'glass ceiling' had not yet been coined but it was firmly in place, just barely above the heads of those in what we would now call 'entry-level positions'. There were very few women in the professions. Professional faculties at universities either banned women students completely or limited their number to a small percentage of the total enrolment. Most women were in low-paying, women's jobs. Men were expected to gradually rise in their employment status: women were expected to work for just a few years before marriage and never return to the workplace. And that is what most of them did!

The few who were still going out to work at the age of thirty were not called 'career women'. The term 'old maid' was applied with a mixture of derision and pity. Girls did not aspire to be old maids. By the time she entered her teens, a girl would have a hope chest. It could be an actual chest, cedar-lined, but it was more likely to be the bottom drawer of a dresser or a shelf in a back cupboard. There, she

gradually accumulated the hand-embroidered tea towels, luncheon cloths and pillow cases for her future home. Centred in the cross-stitched flowers would be a blank area where, upon engagement, the bride-to-be would embroider her future husband's initial. It was considered highly improper to add the initial until one's engagement has been formally announced. Upon marriage, in 1910, a woman dropped her own name and adopted that of her husband. And it was the husband's name only that passed on to the children born of their union.

Strange as it may seem, more than a hundred years later, this is still what most Canadian brides do! When I married sixty-three years ago, I kept my maiden name of Ellis. Friends and family were shocked. They did not think it was legal to do such a thing. It was, and still is. There isn't and never has been any statutory requirement for a woman to adopt her husband's name. It was merely a social custom, reinforcing the belief that the woman is the lesser party in the union. In recent years, a growing percentage of Canadian women are retaining their own name after marriage but, when I married, I knew of no one who had ever done so. My daughter has not only kept her own surname but has given her three children a hyphenated union of their father's and mother's names.

But let us return to 1910. It was around that time that my mother and my aunts were leaving school in Toronto. Their experiences were similar to those of many other girls. My father's family was middle-class as my grandfather owned a small, wholesale jewellery business. They lived in a large house in the area known as 'the Beaches'. They had a motorcar and a summer cottage, possessions that revealed their economic status. My paternal grandmother bore four sons and, finally, a daughter named Ruth. One after the other, my father's brothers left school at the age of 14 and went to work in the family business. (Fourteen was the school-leaving age until 1930s.) Ruth also left school in her early teens but she never worked, although she did not marry until her late twenties. With a father and brothers to support her, she was not expected to contribute to the family income. Her help was not needed at home as there was a full-time housekeeper. I have asked my Aunt Ruth, 'What did you do all day for the fifteen years that you were single and living at home?' She told me that, like other girls being supported by their fathers, she read romantic novels, played the piano, did needlework and kept appointments with dressmakers and hair-dressers. Her life of leisure was not considered odd at the time, as it would be today. All the young women in their teens or twenties with whom I am acquainted are either studying or working. Some are doing both. But it was not always so.

The financial situation was quite different in my mother's working-class family. They also lived in the Beaches but never owned a house. They moved from one rented house to another as the family grew. My maternal grandfather was an immigrant from England who worked as a hardware salesman to support his wife and six children. My mother and all her brothers and sisters left school as soon as it was legally possible and, boys and girls alike, found jobs. Their income was needed to make ends meet. The family never owned a car or a summer cottage, but neither did most of the families in their neighbourhood. My mother worked for the telephone company. In those days, all calls—even local ones—required the services of an operator. So, for the thirteen years between school and marriage, my mother held this white-collar, but dead-end, job. One of her sisters was a salesgirl at Eaton's Department Store and the other was typist in a factory office. Of course, she used a manual typewriter, as there were no electrical typewriters until decades later. There were no Xerox copiers either. If one or two extra copies of a letter were needed, typists had to use carbon paper. My mother and both her sisters lived at home until they married as respectable young ladies were expected to do, and none ever went out to work after marriage.

It was true in the past, just as it is today, that not all bridegrooms turn out to be perfect husbands. Some lose their jobs or become ill. Some prefer to buy beer rather than shoes for their children. And some have a roving eye! There have always been some married women who had to earn money out of economic necessity. Their lot was especially difficult in the period we are talking about as employers refused to hire them. Often, their only option was an extension of household duties like taking in a border, doing dressmaking for neighbours or cleaning the homes of the well-to-do. Whether married or single, few women had anything that could be called 'a career'.

This was the social climate of 1910. Nevertheless, a group of brave and ambitious women working in Toronto founded a club to improve the conditions of women in the workforce. When we think of them, it is with a mixture of awe and gratitude. They had never heard of 'equal pay for equal work', 'pensions for women' or 'maternity leave' but they laid the foundation upon which members of BPW in this city have been building for over a hundred years. Before long, other groups of women organized similar clubs in other areas and, in due course, there were provincial, national and international organizations of business and profession women working towards common goals.

Torontonians have always been active in these larger networks and several have served as President of BPW Ontario or BPW Canada. Two Torontonians have held the office of President of BPW International—Margaret Hyndman and Nazala Dane. I am fortunate in having known both of them as fellow club members. They were truly great women and an inspiration to us all. One year, 1956, is unique in that the Provincial, National and International presidents were all from Toronto; namely Elsie MacGill, Maudie Baylay and Margaret Hyndman.

It was due to a chance encounter on a Toronto bus that I became a BPW member 57 years ago. In the 1950, I was teaching electrical technology at what is now called Ryerson University. At that time, it was known as The Ryerson Institute of Technology. I was the first and only woman in any of the technology departments. Although I lectured there for five years, I never had a female student in any of my classes. There were co-eds at Ryerson but they were in the departments of secretarial science, home economics and fashion design. I spent my days in an entirely masculine environment. When a stranger happened to be chatting with on a TTC bus told me about a group of working women meeting for dinner at the Royal York Hotel once a month, I decided to drop in. It would make a nice change and, as they were employed themselves, I would not be subjected to the usual criticism for not being a housewife. I really thought it was just a social group. I didn't know that they had a mission.

There were about fifty women in attendance, sitting at round tables with a head table at the front. Immediately, I felt at home among them and got to know my tablemates over dinner. One was a lawyer and another a pharmacist. I had never met a women lawyer and I did not even know that there were any women in pharmacy. I was very pleased to meet them and everyone was friendly. No one seemed to think that I must be a 'weirdo' because I was an electrical engineer. They already had a member who was an aeronautical engineer and everyone loved Elsie MacGill. What did amaze my tablemates was the fact that I had a baby whom I had produced without ever leaving the workforce. They thought this accomplishment so remarkable that they insisted I go to the microphone at the head table and tell everyone how I had done it.

Nowadays, you are not surprised if the woman checking out your groceries or the woman teller at your neighbourhood bank is obviously pregnant. If you see her regularly, you might even ask when the baby is due or if it is her first. However, in the 1950s when 'a married woman's place was in the home', there were no pregnant women in the working world. An obviously expectant mother kept out of sight. She

might go for a walk with her husband after dark, but she did not parade around in the daytime in front of strangers. It would not have been 'decent'.

I had been lecturing at Ryerson for several years before my husband and I decided to start a family. When the autumn term opened, I knew that I was pregnant but I said nothing to my colleagues. I knew that I would be fired as soon as my condition became noticeable. In December, I intended to tell the principal that I would not be returning after the Christmas break. However, before doing so, I informed my senior class that I would not be their instructor in the next term. The students were very upset by this news. I taught their major subjects and they did not want a change of professors in the middle of their final year. It was the students who told the principal that they did not care that I was pregnant and pleases with him to let me stay. He said that he would ask permission but doubted if it would be granted. At the time, Ryerson staff members were all Ontario civil servants. The principal applied for permission for me to continue teaching until he could find a suitable replacement. He explained that all my students were over the age of eighteen and that I taught only single-sex classes. The government official who responded to the request must have assumed that I was a home economics or fashion design teacher with all-female classes as he informed the principal that I could continue 'at his discretion'. Consequently, I continued lecturing to all-male classes. Days became weeks and weeks became months. Suddenly, it was the beginning of May. I went into labour on the Saturday and my daughter was born in Women's College Hospital on Sunday.

Of course, I was not available to invigilate exams the following week but my colleagues filled in for me and brought the examination papers to the maternity ward where I marked them. The nurses thought it was a strange activity for a new mother. I remember one of them looking at an exam paper full of vector diagrams and electrical circuits and asking incredulously, 'Do you really know what all that stuff means?' I assured her that I did. After the usual six days in hospital, I returned home with my healthy, nine-pound daughter. The next day, I was back at Ryerson for a staff meeting concerning promotions. There was no such thing as maternity leave in 1958. The expression did not even exist. The Nana, grandmotherly woman we had engaged, took over nursery duties whenever I was not at home. The baby was thriving. The BPW members were delighted by this unusual story and welcomed me into the sisterhood. My daughter suddenly had a lot of 'aunts'.

My students were pleased that I had not abandoned them. Even the principal of Ryerson was happy until the student newspaper, *The Ryersonian*, published a picture of me holding my infant daughter with the caption 'Miss Ellis had a baby!' What a scandal! He insisted that the next issue include a front-page clarification to the effect that Miss Ellis had been married for six years and did, in fact, have a husband. The students thought the principal's reaction amusing because they knew my husband who taught part-time at Ryerson.

The principal's concern was understandable. Sixty years ago, there was nothing funny about being an unmarried mother. There were no 'single moms' living on financial assistance from the government. There were only 'fallen women' and their 'bastards'. Very few single mothers could afford to keep their babies and those who did manage to do so faced the constant humiliation of their child being taunted or shunned by other children. This is one aspect of society that has become more humane over the years. Nowadays, a few mature, single women choose to become mothers through artificial insemination by a sperm donor. In the 1950s, this would have been unthinkable.

As mentioned earlier, I arranged to keep my own surname upon marriage. I never used my husband's name or adopted the title of Mrs. My mother was Mrs. Ellis. I was Miss Ellis. There was no Ms in those

days. My daughter was ten years old before I earned a doctoral degree and became Dr. Ellis. 'Doctor' is a very convenient title as it reveals neither marital status nor gender, the latter being particularly useful to me in my career in the traditionally masculine field of engineering. Many times I had an article accepted for publication, received an invitation to speak or was commissioned to do a certain project before anyone realized that Dr. Ellis was a mere female. Men have always had an advantage in that the title of Mister gives no indication of marital status. Women had to be either Mrs. or Miss. Being Mrs. was a great disadvantage, especially when they sought remunerative employment. Now that the title of Ms has become common, women no longer have to reveal their marital status in situations where it really shouldn't matter.

In my early years as a BPW member, I joined other members in providing Career Days for high school girls. There were no guidance counsellors in schools, so BPW held Saturday sessions to encourage girls to plan for careers, not just jobs, and to consider a wider variety of possible occupations. I always concluded my little talks to girls by saying, 'If the work does not require brute strength or the ability to grow a beard, you can do it just as well as any fellow—maybe even better.' My interest in this particular BPW activity grew out of my own high school experiences.

In the early 1940s, I attended Danforth Technical School in Toronto's east end. I was in the university-bound stream but as well as our academic subjects, we took one practical subject each year. The boys had many options—electricity, woodworking, draughting, auto mechanics, machine shop, etc. We girls had no choice at all. In successive years we had to take dressmaking, cooking, home nursing and then millinery. At the beginning of the fourth year, I had the audacity to ask the form teacher if I could take draughting instead of millinery. She was so shocked that she sent me to see the principal. He told me in no uncertain terms that the school had no facilities for teaching draughting to a girl. Then, in a fatherly tone, he added that I would find it very useful to be able to decorate my own hats.

Near the end of our final year, two people came from the University on Toronto to tell us about university studies—a man to speak to the boys about the various branches of engineering and a woman to tell the girls about Home Economics course. Having already decided to study engineering, I asked politely if I could attend the engineering session. The teacher in charge of the event ridiculed me in front of the class, assuming that I just wanted to 'chase after the boys' and sent me off with the other girls. I had to hear the lecture on home economics but later, as I was nearing the end of my engineering course, there was a request for volunteers to speak to high school seniors about university courses in engineering. Guess who volunteered to speak at Danforth Technical School! The same sexist teacher was still in charge and had to introduce me as the representative of the engineering faculty. It is said that revenge is sweet. It is!

One of the reasons why women used to find it so difficult to get promoted into supervisory or management positions was that they had no credentials. Management training courses were usually given by large companies 'in house' and promising young male employees were encouraged to participate. Women were not invited. During the 1960s and 1970s, BPW members sponsored a programme for women, held on week-ends and called 'The Arts of Management'. The instructors were prominent men from business and industry. Graduates of 'The Arts of Management' were often the first women in their company to break the glass ceiling. Need for these courses declined as education for administrative positions gradually moved from individual companies into the public sector, particularly the universities.

Today, a Master's degree in Business Administration, the M.B.A., is a very saleable degree and it can be earned on a part-time basis. As increasing proportion of M.B.A. graduates are women—including one of my nieces. She obtained her M.B.A. while in full-time employment and has gradually moved into responsible positions in financial institutions. By taking advantage of a couple of paid maternity leaves, she has also raised two fine children. Her grandmother and great aunts (whom you will recall spent their pre-marriage years as telephone operator, salesgirl and typist) could never have imagined having a rewarding career combined with motherhood. Times have changed!

Working women nowadays have many more opportunities and options that their grandmothers did. And BPW—locally, provincially and nationally—has been an important factor in making these changes. We all know that there are still some hurdles and even barriers to women's complete equality in the working world. Nevertheless, if you and I and all our BPW sisters keep up the good work, there can be an entirely level playing field for our granddaughters.

Thank you.