

WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY

LEADING THE WAY FOR WOMEN LEADERS

Recognising the role of womanpower in our community

THE diversity and vitality with which the postwar influx of Shoah survivors infused our Jewish community continues to be alive and well to this day.

It manifests itself in a plethora of organisations encompassing a wide spectrum of ideas, causes and beliefs. It gives our community vibrancy and strength. True, the community has its problems, but on the whole, it is in pretty good shape. And like all good communities, it is supported by four pillars – infrastructure, lay leadership, professional staff and volunteers. What particularly defines a community are the last three pillars, its human capital.

Although I do not have the numbers, anecdotally it would seem the majority of professionals in our community are women, as well as a predominant percentage of volunteers.

In terms of leadership positions, there are 13 women presidents in the 50 communal organisations which are affiliated to the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV) and a significant number of women on the various communal boards. Not exactly equal numbers, but progress nonetheless, for it was not always thus.

In the 1990s, the numbers for professionals and volunteers

NINA BASSAT



would have been similar, but at the leadership level, the numbers were scant. We women were more noticeable by our absence.

Self-evidently, the women's organisations – Emunah, National Council of Jewish Women, WIZO, were led by women. The Zionist Federation of Australia had an outstanding woman president, as did the North Eastern Jewish War Memorial Centre and the Sephardi Association. There were other presidents, but the numbers were remarkably small.

Why the dearth of women in leadership until recent times? Prejudice was not necessarily the only, or even the major, factor. The reasons are many and varied, but in very many cases family responsibility, whether to parents or children, placed almost insurmountable time constraints.

When I became president of the JCCV in 1996, there was a degree of commentary about my being the first woman to preside over a state roof body. I did not allow this to distract me, and fortunately, nor did our community. I saw it as my role

to represent our community to the wider world, to unite it internally and promote its agenda as broadly as possible. It did not appear to me to be a role where gender played any part and because I ignored it, so did everyone else. By the time I became president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ), two years later, it was a far lesser issue, because I took over from Diane Shteinman, the first woman president of ECAJ.

At various times during my tenure my gender was a matter for comment. I chose to ignore that emphasis but have since learnt that to a number of women, particularly younger ones, the fact that I took on those positions meant that they saw communal leadership as a possibility. By 2011, when I again became JCCV president, women presidents were an accepted part of our communal life.

So where are we now? At the beginning of this month, a resolution was passed at the JCCV plenum seeking, among other matters, that all communal organisations sign a Gender Equality Pledge, providing a safe and equitable environment and gender equality at all levels. This should be axiomatic in our society – gender equality should be unquestionable. But from best practice to reality is a very long step, and in the meantime, we should celebrate the present reality.



Nina Bassat has twice served as president of the JCCV.

Photo: Peter Haskin

We have in Victoria 154 Jewish organisations, listed from A-Z in the JCCV diary, covering every possible aspect of life.

Many of those organisations function on the strength of female human capital, whether as leaders, as professionals or as volunteers. It may well be that we do not give sufficient recognition to this. While women are still a long way from having equality at the leadership and board levels, it is womanpower, in its many

aspects, that is not only responsible for the sustainability of our Jewish communal structure, but also for its strength and vibrancy.

Women may not yet be equal in leadership roles, in earning power and in a number of other matrices, but we continue, as always, to punch above our weight.

Nina Bassat was the first female president of the JCCV and the second female president of ECAJ.

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