

CHAPTER 6

The constant undercurrent: Sexual harassment and discrimination

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The first abusive email arrived soon after Rosslyn Beeby joined *The Canberra Times* as science and environment reporter in 2003. She'd spent most of her career reporting on climate change, the environment, and working for an environmental organisation in Sydney, so some older journalists saw her as a greenie and made life difficult when she arrived in the newsroom.

The editor who hired her, Michael Stephens, was also 'not liked' by 'some of the older men' who thought creating an environmental round at the paper was 'pandering to greenies' (seen by these men as a minority readership in Canberra). Stephens had also abolished several news rounds he considered unproductive.

One day, 'out of the blue', Beeby received an email addressed to her and copied to 'a group of about six other men ... the ringleaders' at the paper.

It was a little email about 'Peggy the greenie' and how Peggy ... had climbed a tree because she wanted to see an endangered species ... and how she was so excited to see this

endangered species that she lost her grip and slid all the way down the tree, getting a vagina full of splinters. And how she went to the doctor and said, 'Oh help, help me' as she sort of walked in, hardly able to walk. 'Oh help me, doctor.' The doctor said, 'Oh Peggy, if only I could. But I can't log an old growth area.'

Beeby wrote about endangered species at *The Canberra Times*, and 'Peggy' was the men's mock name for her. Her male critics in the newsroom had escalated and sexualised their harassment. 'It wasn't [just] a case of should that man be calling me love or sweetie,' says Beeby. 'It was clearly targeted at me. It was insulting. It was denigrating the work that I did.'

Beeby wanted an apology, so she forwarded the email to Stephens who promptly censured the author and demanded a written and verbal apology. Beeby says, 'That sort of marked my card with some of those older men'.

About a year later, Beeby began reporting on the culling of kangaroos, which was an important local issue. Her coverage included comment from kangaroo ecologists and animal rights lawyers at the Australian National University, attracting international attention from animal welfare websites.

'It was interesting the viciousness that it attracted,' says Beeby.

On the day the 'roo culling season opened, she walked into the office to find something awry with her desk.

'Some papers had been rearranged [so] I picked them up and they had been put over the top of a toy kangaroo with its head cut off. That had to be from somebody in the newsroom,' she says.

Gender discrimination, bullying and sexual harassment have long been part of journalism work in Australia.¹ What happened to Beeby was disturbing, but she remembers other women in *The Canberra Times* also experienced harassment. Research on women in the industry shows ample evidence of an entrenched gender pay

gap, discriminatory 'mummy track' roles for women returning from maternity leave,² and far too much intimidation, abuse or sexual harassment perpetrated by bosses and co-workers.³ The industry has a poor track record on gender equality. The stories are awful but, as any self-respecting journalist would say, they must be told.

At *The News* in Adelaide, Samela Harris remembers that women dealt with the male-dominated newsroom 'quite well'. She says during the 1960s 'there wasn't a lot of oppression or female harassment in any shape or form' and that women 'were treated with a fair amount of respect in terms of being a sex object'. Harris did experience one situation while a cadet at *The News*, though, which led her to react.

I'm hammering on my ... typewriter, the great big, huge clamouring old things we used to use, and this sub came and stood behind me and put his arms over my shoulders and put his hands over my breasts as I'm writing.

Harris could have been paralysed or ashamed, but her 'instant reaction' was to 'pull my arm forward and then let my elbow go back as hard as I could right into his beer belly'. The sub, who Harris says, 'had probably had a bit to drink', 'let out an almighty oomph and never did it again'. It was a cathartic moment for her. 'I've never forgotten the feeling of my elbow going into that beer belly ... It was really satisfying,' she says.

Veronica Ridge recalls when she joined *The Herald* as an 18-year-old in 1973, women were basically seen as 'a piece of meat'. There was 'a lot of sexual harassment', as well as bullying and 'very nasty characters who'd be very aggressive'. One particular older columnist gave her a 'rough time'.

'I told him that I liked the arts and show business', recalls Ridge, 'so he said he'd like to show me around'. The older journalist took her to a local theatre restaurant called Tikki and John's where he