

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

# Opening up pathways for girls and young women

**OPINION** The principals of three leading independent girls schools discuss ways of expanding career possibilities for their charges.



**DEBBIE DUNWOODY**  
Principal  
Camberwell Girls Grammar School

“Women and girls represent half of the world’s population and, therefore, half of its potential. However, Australia ranked a poor 43rd in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index, indicating that everyone has a vital role to play to address this issue.

The imperative to achieve gender equality is essential for social progress and a healthier and more prosperous world. So, where to start if we are serious about gender equality?

Quality education for girls is key. It ensures that the world has diversity of thought, a perspective that values collaboration and the benefit of the talent, creativity and ideas of half of the world’s population, demonstrating that girls are intrinsically valued for who they are.

The culture of schools and workplaces must be inclusive to activate opportunities for individuals and groups to thrive.

Everyone needs to feel safe to voice their opinions, ask questions, feel listened to, and be supported in taking healthy risks. Respectful behaviour must be expected and modelled by those in positions of authority to enable all, especially girls and women, to be valued and supported.

Inclusive cultures recognise biases in expectations, language and actions that intentionally or inadvertently discriminate against girls and women. Biases that subvert leadership opportunities or influence girls’ perception of their worthiness must be recognised and challenged.

We must prioritise the development of leadership skills and of great importance is teaching girls and women that they can lead in any field.

Empowerment is essential in forging new pathways and breaking cycles of discrimination and violence. Demonstrating confidence and being more self-assured in speaking up – and stepping up – is key.

Finally, we must teach our girls and young women to be financially independent. Having the knowledge to manage their own expenses, as well as saving and investing for the future, creates autonomy and helps protect them against financial abuse.

As a girls’ school committed to these actions, our hope is that all our girls will experience the day when they will not be seen as female only.

Instead, as highly esteemed equals, and in years to come, that they are able to gift a more equitable path for future generations. Our role, no matter what our gender, is to make sure that they are truly given the opportunity.”



**SUSAN JUST**  
Principal  
Lauriston Girls’ School

“Women in tech are in demand right now, and with good reason. According to the TechCouncil of Australia, 74 per cent of today’s tech workers are men. Diversity of thought and perspective is lacking and is set to decline further with women making up just 10 per cent of people studying a university qualification in tech-related fields.

Research indicates that career aspirations and interests develop in young people at an early age, and we know that not enough girls are completing STEM-based subjects at school and university.

So, what can educators do to help girls choose tech?

I believe that imagination and real-world application play an integral part in sparking a girls’ interest in STEM.

At Lauriston, our STEM program is founded on the belief that imagination makes empathy and curiosity possible, and we believe that these traits are often more important than the acquisition of knowledge.

By putting imagination at the core of our STEM curriculum, we see our girls finding joy in their learning and being more comfortable in taking risks rather than fretting about ‘getting the answer right’.

We also focus on providing girls with the opportunity to tinker, enabling them to gain confidence in STEM from an early age. In year 1, girls are tasked to design a sustainable fairy house for the school’s garden. They consider various shapes, materials and environmental challenges, spending time modifying and improving their designs on a graphics app. They then visit our FabLab to watch their designs come to life via a laser cutter.

As girls progress through their schooling, they need to be provided with a better understanding of the range of tech and digital career pathways possible, and how STEM and tech careers make a positive difference on people’s lives.

Accenture’s year 13 research shows just 33 per cent of young women consider a career in tech, compared to 69 per cent of young men. My experience is that girls are more likely to opt for careers in tech if they have exposure to female practitioners and relatable role models.

All students at Lauriston get the opportunity to hear from female programmers, engineers, designers and scientists as part of various incursions/excursions, via our student futures and pathways program, and through community mentors. Guest speakers help girls relate to and understand the variety of STEM-related career pathways that exist. The more exposure to others, the better.

I believe we can inspire and empower today’s young women to choose tech and am hopeful that we will see the proportion of women working in tech grow over the next decade.”



**KRISTY KENDALL**  
Principal  
Toorak College

“Can women really have it all?” It is impossible to approach International Women’s Day this year without discussing – and challenging – this recent headline.

It appeared shortly after Jacinda Arden announced to the world in January that she would be resigning from her position as New Zealand Prime Minister, and questioned the ability of women to truly “have it all”.

While my jaw dropped and my head shook, it did not take me long to lift my shoulders, narrow my gaze and remind myself of the fortunate position I am in – to be able to lead in an all-girls school.

The significance of International Women’s Day and environments that set out to shift the conversation, narrative and future for women, have never been so important.

I watch as people scratch their heads as to why there are not more women in politics and leadership, and wonder how long it will take for one simple realisation to take hold: it is because we are not doing enough to attract, support and promote them.

At Toorak College, we are proud to partner with organisations such as Downer and Cell Care who are determined to do things differently. They work with our students during their time at school and select candidates straight out of year 12 to mentor, support and promote within their company while they complete their university studies. They attract the best female talent they can imagine.

These girls are creative, courageous and ready to lead in these speciality STEM fields, and our industry partners are committed to nurturing those qualities within each of them.

So, what can we do to foster career pathways for young women that may lead to gender equity in the workplace? Stop expecting schools to do all the work while organisations don’t change.

If you are in human resources, talent acquisition, development or leadership roles within organisations, think about how you can attract this best talent differently.

Make the connections earlier, provide opportunities for groups of young women to design and create together, show them their value and worth to you.

The young women we graduate know they can have it all; show them they are right.”

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**DEBBIE DUNWOODY**