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COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

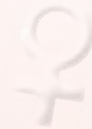
Feminism in Townsville
1975-2025

TOWNSVILLE FEMINIST COLLECTIVE

The background features a soft, painterly illustration of a tropical scene. On the left, there are several palm trees with green fronds and brown trunks. In the center and right, there are rolling hills or mountains in shades of green and yellow. A faint, light-colored silhouette of a woman is visible on the right side, appearing to be in a dynamic pose. The overall color palette is warm and muted, with a hazy, dreamlike atmosphere.

***“Women’s history is women’s right ...
an essential, indispensable heritage
from which we can draw pride, comfort,
courage, and long-range vision.”***

Gerda Lerner (1920–2013)
*Austrian–American pioneer
in women’s history (Buhle 2013)*





COLLECTIVE MEMORIES:
Feminism in Townsville 1975–2025

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Townsville Feminist Collective



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Back cover: Original painting *Castle Hill view of the CBD* 2014 by © Pauline Woodbridge (reproduced with permission)

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To listen to in-depth interviews
with some of
Townsville’s leading feminists
search for our
PODCASTS
at **Townsville Citylibraries**



Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Country

Townsville Feminist Collective acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia, including the Wulgurukaba and Bindal peoples of the Townsville area, and pay respect to Elders past and present.

Important Notice

This eBook contains names and images of First Nations people who have passed away.

—◦ *Dedication* ◦—



This eBook is dedicated to **Madge Sceriha** (1935–2016) and **Ginni Hall** (1932–2020), both long-time members of the Townsville Feminist Collective and active feminists in the local community over many years.

Disclaimers

This work makes no claim to being a definitive history. While we have made every effort to research existing relevant materials and attempted to make contact with other women from this period and include their recollections, we readily acknowledge that we may well be missing valuable stories. Our story is largely drawn from our own memories and, consequently, reflects our own experiences and priorities, featuring those things that have stayed with us as being important. In that spirit, we offer it.

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PREFACE

OUR society is a product of multiple lifetimes of lived experience and knowledge passed down through generations, so that the accumulated benefit can improve the lives of all who follow. But, in reality, a significant proportion of that precious historical information has routinely ‘disappeared’. Women’s efforts and ideas have frequently been trivialised and suppressed under patriarchy, and even when they’ve managed to succeed against the odds, any records have too often been quickly erased. And there have seldom been any impressive statues, scholarships or spacecraft bearing their names, and honouring their achievements into the future.

Knowing that women’s history is often lost or made invisible, the Townsville Feminist Collective, a long-standing grassroots women’s group, were determined not to let that happen yet again. So some members of the Collective set about a ground-breaking project, titled ‘Recording and preserving the herstory of feminism in Townsville 1975–2025’. This eBook, *Collective memories: feminism in Townsville 1975–2025*, was the major outcome of that project, along with an archive of resource materials. We wanted to ensure that future generations of women wouldn’t have to start from the beginning every time they went looking for effective strategies in the ongoing fight against patriarchal oppression. Because, as we know, even though the times, techniques and technologies change, the fundamental oppressive structures remain the same – and can be challenged.

The process of creating the book occurred over two years of regular meetings beginning in 2023, but the original idea had emerged about ten years earlier. Many local women had been heavily involved in the rise and fruition of the Women’s Liberation Movement from the 1970s onward, and had retained a wealth of vital records and memories which chronicled the development of feminism in Townsville as it happened.

The Townsville Feminist Collective members who volunteered to work on the project were: Nonie Harris, Maree Hawken, Coralie McLean, Betty McLellan, Chantal Oxenham, Judith Threlfall and Pauline Woodbridge.

The group developed a list of the main focus areas, and set about researching the topics and speaking with associated women and organisations. The project was truly a collaborative effort at every step – brainstorming, gathering, interviewing, writing, editing, designing, illustrating, and publicising – resulting in a rich and varied approach from chapter to chapter, all woven into a collective whole. And in keeping with the long tradition of grassroots feminist organising and activism, much discussion took place across a dining room table.

It was a particular mission to name as many women as possible, while also respecting the privacy of others; and thus, the inclusion of photos was limited. The scope of the project was primarily confined to the activities of feminists; however, we do not presume to have comprehensively covered all feminist activism that occurred in Townsville from 1975 to 2025, and while every effort was made, any omissions were unintentional. Furthermore, we recognise that numerous other women had played significant roles in improving women’s lives during this period. Perhaps this book might act as a catalyst in encouraging other local groups to record and preserve their histories, while the opportunity still exists.

We, members of the Townsville Feminist Collective, would like to acknowledge:

- the contributions of the many women who shared their time, knowledge, and memories of the progress of feminism in Townsville, including the staff of local women’s services;
- the ‘women who came before’ (*see “Appendices”*) and all women who have participated in improving women’s rights for generations, and those who continue to do so;
- the support of staff from Townsville Citylibraries, and the Townsville Museum and Historical Society; and
- the generous assistance of Debra Miles, who reviewed the intermediate manuscript of this eBook.

INTRODUCTION

WHO could have imagined that Townsville, a regional city on the north-east coast of Queensland, Australia, would become the nation's 'hot-bed of radical feminism'? While that label may be an exaggeration, the fact is that for some decades spanning the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Townsville feminists were making their mark, determined to confront patriarchy and create a better world for all.

Of all the social movements of the 20th century, feminism was and is, arguably, the most significant. Igniting in the 1960s, and continuing to the present, it has been a movement of great vigour, passion, commitment and promise. Women rallied, organised, connected with each other, created knowledge and culture, developed new ways of seeing the world, and fought for a world with justice and equality at its centre.

At first glance, Townsville must have appeared to many to be the last place such a movement would occur: in the deep north of the very conservative state of Queensland. Its reputation was that of a conservative, 'redneck', male-oriented city. Situated 1,300 km north of the capital Brisbane, Townsville, before the age of the internet, was considered remote and isolated, and it was that sense of isolation that spurred the women of Townsville to action. Aware of the Movement for Women's Liberation throughout the

FEMINISM

is a political movement
that seeks to address
inequality, discrimination and
men's violence against women.

In relation to feminism,
'radical' means 'root causes'.
Therefore, 'radical feminism'
is the branch of feminism that
rejects superficial reform
in favour of engaging with
the root causes of
women's oppression.

Western world, they were determined to respond to their isolation by “doing it for themselves” (Eurhythmics 1985).

An important part of doing it for themselves, though, was their openness to input from other women who visited Townsville. Due to the transient nature of Townsville’s population, there were periodically women coming with fresh ideas and, while their stay was usually of short duration, the stable core of women who were permanent residents were always keen to incorporate new and relevant ideas into their continuing work.

This particular combination of circumstances may be the primary reason why feminist thinking and activism developed as it did in this city, enduring over many decades and leaving a legacy worth preserving and recording.

As each chapter of this eBook will testify, much has been accomplished for women both locally and globally, and that is due to the huge investment of time and energy for women by women. Here’s how the story unfolded in Townsville:

Buoyed by the United Nations’ announcement of 1975 as International Women’s Year, Townsville feminists involved themselves in the feminist revolution with energy and passion, as **Chapter 1** reveals. Women found their voices, made their demands known to governments and community leaders, offered themselves up to the political system for preselection to different levels of government, and confidently took their place as leaders and decision-makers alongside men.

An obvious feature of those early years was women’s seemingly unquenchable thirst for feminist knowledge and Townsville feminists were quick to respond to that need. **Chapter 2** describes a variety of ways in which that was achieved, including formal opportunities offered at James Cook University (JCU). The establishment of a Centre for Women’s Studies at JCU provided an opportunity for the pursuit of high-quality academic research and a further development of feminist theory. Another avenue for women to access up-to-date feminist thinking and research was through women’s bookshops, and Townsville’s Mary Who? Bookshop was a significant partner in this endeavour.

Chapter 3 describes a different kind of opportunity for learning offered by Townsville feminists. In response to a perceived need, they organised a number of conferences in the 1980s aimed at bringing local women together and providing opportunities for sharing with, and learning from, other women. Then, in the 2000s, they branched out and went global, courageously organising exciting international feminist events.

While all that was happening, a different type of response to women's thirst for feminist knowledge continued at a local level in the form of lectures, forums, seminars and workshops. These events, organised by feminist leaders in the community, are described in **Chapter 4**. Always looking for opportunities to learn and connect, women from Townsville and surrounding areas flocked to these events.

It was not all work, however. Alongside the pursuit of knowledge and activism was the desire for fun and creativity. Mindful of the fact that creative expression had always been an integral part of the feminist movement, Townsville feminists organised shows, performances, concerts and other gatherings – many of which involved high-profile national and international artists. **Chapter 5** describes something of the fun and enthusiasm that surrounded these creative experiences.

Finally, **Chapter 6** describes in some detail that which is, in fact, a core activity of the feminist movement: the challenge of working to meet the needs of women, and helping to improve the quality of their everyday lives. This chapter reminds us of the difficult work undertaken by management and staff in all women's services in Townsville, from the establishment of the Women's Shelter in 1975 to the present time.

As we offer this historical account, gleaned from our own collective memories as well as from helpful discussions we had with other women, it is our hope that our story will inspire future generations of feminists to continue the work of challenging patriarchal systems with a view to creating a fairer world.



Whadda we want?

WOMEN'S RIGHTS!



CHAPTER 1

FEMINIST POLITICS AND ACTIVISM

THIS period of time in Townsville (1975–2025) saw much activity protesting against the issues of discrimination, oppression and violence against women in patriarchal society. At first glance, however, all of the work feminist activists engaged in to challenge the excesses of patriarchy is not immediately obvious. The media of the day was not a fertile source of information about what was happening in protest, in raising awareness or in efforts to lobby government on decisions being made that adversely affected women’s lives. If some activity was reported in the media, it was substantially shaped to reflect the impact those actions or comments potentially had on men.

Fortunately, the women themselves have proven to be a rich source of information with memories, diary notes, pamphlets, posters, letters and speeches all carefully kept to record the passion, energy, anger and love demonstrated by feminist activists in Townsville.

1975 – International Women’s Year

The United Nations declaration of 1975 as International Women’s Year (IWY) signalled a mood for change across Australia and women responded to it with energy and enthusiasm. In Townsville, they organised an exciting range of activities aimed at celebrating women as well as raising awareness of key issues.

In her contribution to *Women and Whitlam* (2023), Margaret Reynolds (former Senator for Queensland) notes that the Townsville branch of the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) was one of the groups actively involved in organising events to mark International Women’s Year.

They organised the first Townsville International Women’s Day (IWD) march that year. On Saturday 8 March, more than 100 women marched down Flinders Street chanting slogans, such as ‘Free safe abortion now’ and ‘A woman’s place is in the House – and in the Senate’. The *Townsville Bulletin* reported on the event on 10 March 1975 with an article titled ‘Women on the move’ (p. 2), noting that many of the participants wore “costumes or t-shirts with the IWY logo”, and that the parade included singing, chanting and street theatre. Some city shoppers were apparently enticed into joining the march which was followed by the official opening of the shopfront ‘Women’s Work’ at 265 Flinders Street.

While the IWD march focused on one particular day, other activities ran throughout the year. Of note is the regular IWY column in the *Townsville Bulletin* with content canvassed and provided by WEL. This was an effective means of both sharing information and raising awareness. Some of the many contributions to the column included:

- an early item that invited readers to write in with their views on feminism;
- another expressing outrage that, despite the efforts of the local manager, the new ABC Radio women’s issues program, *Coming out ready or not*, was broadcast only to metropolitan centres, bypassing Townsville!
- a notification that the Deputy Mayor, Joan Innes Reid, would launch an appeal for a women’s refuge at a public meeting planned for 4 April, and reminding readers that the success of this worthwhile venture would depend largely on community involvement (*see “Chapter 6”* for more information on the early years of the Townsville Women’s Shelter).

As well as this newspaper column, there were also scheduled broadcast programs focusing on International Women’s Year on local radio stations 4TO and 4AY.

Another significant WEL initiative was a Speakers’ Program running throughout the year and hosting high-profile guests, such as:

- Quentin Bryce, a lawyer from Brisbane (later, Governor General of Australia); and
- Dorothy McRae-McMahon, an advocate for women’s equality in the Uniting Church.

The range of activities on offer throughout the year served to mobilise and politicise women in Townsville and link them into events happening across the country.

That same year, six local women decided to travel to Canberra to attend the National Women in Politics Conference. Margaret Reynolds was one of the group, and in *Women and Whitlam* (2023) she provides some details about her experiences. By all accounts, it was a wonderful, exhilarating and inspiring conference. However, media coverage was not positive and, finding the reports both inaccurate and condescending, a large group of women from the conference decided to respond by occupying the offices of the *Canberra Times* and demanding more professional journalistic standards. Margaret commented that “those few days reinforced [her] personal commitment to feminism and [her] determination to work for change in North Queensland” (p. 152).

International Women’s Year created significant opportunities for many women in Townsville to connect, to organise and to take action – for a better world for women.

Feminists in Politics

Among those supporting the activism, and promoting the cause of women’s human rights over the decades, were women politicians in Townsville – those who had been elected to federal, state and local governments – along with others who stood as candidates but were unsuccessful.¹

Local women take office – Townsville and Palm Island (Bwngcolman)

Joan Innes Reid, already well known in the welfare sector, entered politics as a Councillor on the Townsville City Council in 1967. She was the first elected woman on the Council and then, in 1973, became the first woman deputy mayor. In *Tropical odyssey of a pioneer social worker in North Queensland* (1996) co-written with Ros Thorpe, Joan acknowledges the leadership of Susie Dickson and other women involved in the foundation of the Townsville branches of both the Women’s Electoral Lobby (WEL) and the Australian Local Government Women’s Association

1 Source: Based on a range of sources, including: Townsville City Council <<https://www.townsville.qld.gov.au>>, The Australian Women’s Register <<https://www.womenaustralia.info>>, Parliament of Australia <<https://www.aph.gov.au>> and Hansard <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard>, Queensland Parliament <<https://www.parliament.qld.gov.au>>, Townsville Citylibraries *Stories of Townsville* <<https://stories.townsville.qld.gov.au>>; and personal knowledge.

(ALGWA). These organisations, she said, provided the platform for her to enter politics and a way to effect real change in the welfare sector. Since Joan, many more women have made their mark in politics in Townsville and on Palm Island.

Margaret Reynolds served on the Townsville City Council from 1979 to 1983 and then became Senator for Queensland in the Federal Government from 1983 to 1999. She was the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women from 1988 to 1990. Margaret was one of the architects of the motion adopted at the Australian Labor Party's National Conference in Hobart in 1994, requiring that women comprise 35% of candidates preselected for winnable seats at state and federal elections by 2002.

Her support for women is well documented. She contributed to the establishment of the Women's Electoral Lobby that came into being nationally in 1972 and in Townsville later that same year. The Lobby was initially set up to interview all candidates for the 1972 federal election about their attitudes to issues being enunciated by the Women's Liberation Movement. WEL went on to contribute well-researched and accurate submissions to government on issues affecting women.

Jenny Hill was first elected to the Townsville City Council in 1997 and became Townsville's first female Mayor in 2012. She championed the role of women in local government until the end of her tenure in 2024. Jenny consistently supported events held for women and by women, both in her role as Mayor, and as a woman living and working in a world structured by patriarchy.

Lindy Nelson-Carr, member of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland for Mundingburra from 1998 to 2012 and member of Cabinet from 2006, established a branch of EMILY's List in Townsville. EMILY's List is a political network formed to increase the number of women Labor parliamentarians who are willing to support the crucial issues of child care, equal pay and reproductive choice.

Anita Phillips, member of the Legislative Assembly of Queensland for Thuringowa from 2001 to 2004, in her maiden speech acknowledged the support of EMILY's List. Also, she paid tribute to Joan Innes Reid for her courage and determination, and for the example she set for the women who would come after her. In a later speech to parliament, in 2002, Anita presented a succinct overview of the work being undertaken by key women's services in Townsville at the time.²

2 For this unique historical snapshot, *see* the Hansard transcript (Phillips 2002), <<https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/speeches/spk2002/Anita%20Phillips%20spk%20Thuringowa%2020020308-1.PDF>>

Coralee O'Rourke was elected in 2015 and served in the Legislative Assembly of Queensland as the Member for Mundingburra from 2015 to 2020. During her tenure, Coralee served as Minister for Disability Services and then Minister for Seniors.

In 2016, **Cathy O'Toole** was the first woman elected to the federal seat of Herbert. She had been unsuccessful in her 2013 attempt but was victorious in 2016, although her victory was hard won, coming in just 37 votes ahead of her opponent after a recount. These were exciting times indeed.

Erykah Kyle was elected to the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council in 2005 and served as Palm Island's Mayor from 2005 to 2006. Following the death of Mulrunji Doomadgee in police custody in November 2004, and subsequent investigations, she was outraged, and resigned her position as Mayor in 2006 (Human Rights Law Centre 2017).

Delena Foster served as a Councillor on the Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council from 2001 to 2003. Then, following the resignation of Erykah Kyle, she was elected to the position of Mayor and served as Mayor of Palm Island from 2006 to 2008.

As feminists, both Erykah and Delena were strong in their determination to fight racism and sexism in their community.

The Australian Women's Party

In 1995, the inaugural meeting of the Townsville sector of the Australian Women's Party (AWP) was held at the Women's Centre (North Queensland Combined Women's Services – *see* Chapter 6) in Patrick Street, Aitkenvale. This was the beginning of an exciting time in politics for women in Townsville. In February 1996, Pauline Woodbridge contested the seat of Mundingburra for the AWP in a Queensland State by-election.

Pauline's campaign launch speech, delivered on 15 January 1996, was strong and passionate. Here are some excerpts:

“Right at this moment, history is being made. I am launching my election campaign for the seat of Mundingburra as the first ever candidate for the Australian Women's Party. This occasion is momentous. It is a celebration not just for women but also for everyone who values representative democracy ...

“The essence of my campaign, and the philosophy of the Australian Women's Party, is the issue of social justice. Some say the term has become hackneyed, but it must again become meaningful in relation to full employment, industrial



Pauline Woodbridge (pictured right) at the inaugural meeting of the Australian Women's Party, March 1995

rights and anti-discrimination. If I am elected on February 3rd, I will work to uphold human rights and, in particular, the rights of people who commonly suffer discrimination in society ...”

Josephine Sailor, AWP candidate for the seat of Herbert, described herself as the daughter of an Aboriginal woman from Coen and a Kalkadoon man from Mount Isa/Cloncurry.

As an active member of the community over many years, **she was involved in setting up a number of Indigenous organisations in Townsville.**

At the time she ran for the seat of Herbert, she was a final year student undertaking a Bachelor of Arts majoring in history at JCU.

(Source: Andrea Kyle, 10 June 2025, pers. comm.)

After an exciting campaign, Pauline Woodbridge came 4th in a field of 12. Amazing! Even today, Pauline is still moved when remembering the support she received from her campaign team and the women of Townsville.

Then, in the federal election of 2 March 1996, Townsville woman Josephine Sailor stood as the AWP candidate for the seat of Herbert in the House of Representatives. Lizbeth Yuille was on the AWP Senate ticket for Queensland that same year. Sadly, they were both unsuccessful.



REFLECTIONS ...

Jenny Hughey, member of the Australian Women's Party Founding Committee, reflects on the beginnings of this exciting initiative:


The Australian Women's Party (AWP) was a great example of the feminist energy and front-line activism generated through the feminist movement of the 1960s, 70s and 80s. It was a time when brave women were demanding equal numbers of women in our parliaments as one strategy to curb the extremes of misogyny and empower women.

The Party grew exceptionally quickly with radical feminists from across the country joining together to register the party and stand women for election. We devised radical feminist orientated policies. With little funding and with no sitting member of parliament to lead the action, the AWP challenged the major parties to preselect women into winnable seats. This empowered many women, energising them to take action through an amazing national postcard election campaign with all the energy documented in a regular newsletter.

The success of the AWP lay in empowering women to support each other and face democracy head on. Very few women had ever stood for parliament representing the major parties in winnable seats. Consequently, it was a major feat for a woman to put her name on an AWP ticket. However, there was no shortage of women prepared to put their names forward. North Queensland had one of the first candidates when Pauline Woodbridge stood in a by-election in the state seat of Mundingburra in Townsville.

Jeni Eastwood and I travelled to Townsville and stayed with an AWP member to assist with the Mundingburra campaign. We walked the entire electorate delivering flyers to every household. We also set up a stall in a local shopping centre and talked to people all day about the AWP. The reception was great during the campaign but votes on the day did not support Pauline to win.

In the feminist created AWP, women found a supportive environment where equality for all was the ethos. There is no doubt that the AWP was an outstanding feminist step towards equality.



First Nations Advocates and Activists

Informed by timeless wisdom and enduring experiences of colonial settlement, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Townsville and at nearby Palm Island Aboriginal Community (Bwgcolman) have, over the decades, taken strong stands on significant issues, such as Indigenous human rights – in particular, as they impact women.

They have also involved themselves in many practical, political and cultural endeavours contributing to the ongoing well-being of First Nations people and promoting respect for Indigenous lives. Over the years, significant contributions have been made in areas such as health, education, child care, media, the arts, music and culture, local government, women’s safety and legal support.

While too numerous to list all, the names of some of these strong and dedicated First Nations women are here mentioned:

Angie Akee, Chris George, Jeannie Herbert, Erykah Kyle, Bonita Mabo, Gail Mabo, Shireen Malamoo, Thelma McAvoy, Florence Onus, Josephine Sailor, Dorothy Savage, Vicki Saylor, Gracelyn Smallwood, Mary Twaddle, Virginia Wyles.

Most recently, the 2023 referendum on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice³ was a key national event. Janine Gertz was one of the Indigenous women who took an active role in the consultation process in Townsville and campaigned strongly for the ‘Yes’ vote.

In a *Townsville Bulletin* article (Bates 2023, p. 4) following the failed referendum, Gracelyn Smallwood, a prominent activist for Indigenous and women’s rights, lamented the result and described it as a defeat for decency and a victory for fear-mongering, lies and betrayal. She was also quick to declare that the struggle for justice and for a better Australia would continue!

3 See <<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/support-a-voice-to-parliament/>>; <<https://www.reconciliation.org.au/support-a-voice-to-parliament/100-years-of-calls-for-voice/>>

Campaigns for Abortion Rights

The Pregnancy Termination Control Bill 1980

In 1980, the Bjelke-Petersen Government introduced a Bill to the Queensland Parliament that aimed to criminalise abortion in all circumstances unless a woman's death was imminent (Marszaleck 2011). This created much anger among Queensland women, including those in Townsville. A meeting and panel discussion was held on 13 May 1980. June Tonnoir's carefully kept records of the day included an attendance list of over 100 women. Some women were from organisations: WEL, Townsville General Hospital, and *Points North* (a local ABC television program); but many more women were involved as individuals, describing themselves as mothers and grandmothers. Dr Betty McLellan chaired the event and there were four speakers. Speakers in favour of the Bill were Olive Scott-Young and Colleen Hegarty, while those who spoke against the Bill were Dr Dorothy Cole and Alderman Brian Dobinson. Women who attended the meeting and subsequent action meetings, wrote to members of the Queensland Government, expressing in no uncertain terms their disgust and horror at this attempt to oppress women.

The result was that this particular attempt to control women's bodies by an act of parliament failed.

The important role played by Dr Dorothy Cole deserves special mention. Dr Cole was a pioneer in women's reproductive health in Townsville, and was the first doctor at the Family Planning Clinic she helped to set up in 1974. That same year, she upset the establishment when, during a lecture at James Cook University, she advised students to take the pill and to use condoms. Several years later (1982), Dr Cole organised for a doctor who offered terminations to visit Townsville. His visit caused a serious split in the medical fraternity, but she was not deterred. She was determined to continue her fight for women's reproductive rights.

Protests following raids on abortion clinics in Queensland – 1985

In May 1985, Queensland police raided alleged illegal abortion clinics (Smee 2018) one Monday and, by Tuesday, a group of about 50 very angry and alarmed women had met and formed a new protest group in Townsville, called 'Freedom of Choice'. On Friday, more than 300 people attended a meeting at the city administration building. The meeting demanded: that amendments be made to the state's abortion laws; that charges be dropped for all persons; and that all medical files taken

from the clinics be returned immediately. Petitions were handed around and a motion condemning the state government was carried unanimously.

Termination of Pregnancy Act 2018 (Qld)

It was seen as a significant victory for women's protests when, in 2018, this Act ruled that termination of pregnancy be treated as a health issue rather than a criminal issue. This, of course, eased the need for the kind of protests organised in Queensland in 1985 but it was never made easy. As recently as 2023, women from Townsville still had to travel to Brisbane to obtain surgical abortions because of a lack of appropriate services locally.

Protests Big and Small

International Women's Day

International Women's Day (IWD), observed on 8 March each year, is a global celebration of the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. But it's more than that. It also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity. The origin of IWD is in grassroots activism and, in Townsville, from the initial march in 1975 onward, there was always both celebration and activism. Women from all walks of life rallied each year to listen to feminist speakers, and march and chant to claim a voice on this internationally recognised day for women. Here are a few examples:

In 1985, the Women's Centre organised a rally to mark the end of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975–1985) and about 60 women gathered in the Perfume Gardens in the city to hear Senator Margaret Reynolds, Palm Island feminist Erykah Kyle, Alderman Val Valentine, and local feminist Betty McLellan, reflect on the decade. While Senator Reynolds acknowledged that the federal government had a range of policies that recognised the rights of women, and that women had gained great freedoms, she reminded all who attended that there was still a long way to go.

In 2005, more than 100 women marched along The Strand chanting about reproductive rights, men's violence against women and safe places for women's voices. The theme was 'Celebrate the past, claim the future'. Speakers at the rally, Betty McLellan, Deputy Mayor Ann Bunnell and James Cook University Lecturer

Florence Onus, spoke to the women gathered about the important role that women had in community leadership, and the uphill battle to stamp out the still high levels of violence and pornography.

While those years of rallies and marches were always exciting and there was an expectation that change would occur, it must be said that it occurred at a glacial pace.

By 2025, the focus of IWD had gradually shifted from protest to celebration, and rather than marches and rallies, local IWD activities were more likely to feature events such as corporate breakfasts, fun runs, sporting and business functions, or similar. However, one particular event held that year, jointly organised by the North Queensland Women's Legal Service (see "Chapter 6") and the Human Rights Commission, hosted long-time local feminist Pauline Woodbridge as Guest Speaker. Pauline spoke about the original intent of IWD, the ways in which women's activism had evolved in Townsville over the decades and the need for the struggle to continue. Her words resonated with the 65 or so women in attendance, their feedback demonstrating that many remained committed to the ongoing feminist cause.

After the **International Women's Day march and rally in 1985**, there was a piece in the *Townsville Bulletin* (9 March 1985, p. 3) that referred to the women who attended as "old boiler hens". Susie Dickson, an esteemed senior feminist, penned an eloquent letter to the editor in response.

In the letter, she assured the columnist that most radical feminists supported the concepts of womanhood and motherhood as much as he did, but that they did worry about some male attitudes to fatherhood and to women, for example the choice to insult old women with the sort of derogatory terms he had used.

She went on to remind him that, in fact, the "old boiler hens" who had demonstrated in the streets for a better deal for all women were well aware that their past efforts had achieved much, including **"the acceptance of the principle of equal pay for women, the establishment of women's refuges and rape crisis centres, the election of women to government and a worldwide network of feminist sisterhood"**.

Susie reminded him that he wouldn't stay in the prime of life forever and wondered what sort of an "old cock" he would make (Dickson 14 March 1985, p. 4).

Reclaim the Night marches

‘Reclaim the Night’ marches started in Rome in 1976. Women demanded their share of space, free from harassment, intimidation and rape. In that spirit, women and children marched defiantly. Also, they attended dances, movies and performances organised for women and children only.

In Townsville, women gathered to Reclaim the Night and, in 1992 in particular, gathered in great numbers. There was a march along The Strand, followed by a dance and music in a local hotel where women were able to enjoy themselves without fear of harassment or comment. One man tried to spoil this one night of freedom by asserting his ‘right’ to be included. The next day, it was very disappointing for the women who organised the event and for those who attended, to find that the local newspaper had given a half page coverage to how hard done by this one man felt, and nothing about the reasons women felt the need to protest and demand their right to be in any space without fear. In contrast, other men had lined the streets in support of the march on that particular night, a fact that was appreciated and acknowledged by the organisers when they responded in the ‘Letters to the Editor’ page the following day.

Red Rose Rallies

Red Rose Rallies were organised in response to the murder of women by men and have been held in Queensland since 2010. In Townsville, the North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service (later ‘DVNQ’ – see “Chapter 6”) has invited the community to join a vigil every time a woman has been killed by a man who was her partner or ex-partner. Anyone could also post a red rose on their social media page. The message was: ‘We do this because we care about these women and we are angry that men’s violence against women continues unabated. Everyone has a part to play in stopping this tragic loss of life’.

Women against violence against women

Following the publication of a particularly un-funny cartoon in the *Townsville Advertiser* (12 September 1991) making light of men’s violence against women, and giving the impression that the violence perpetrated against women is women’s own fault, there was outrage among women and men in the community who were concerned about the level of violence directed toward women.

There were many letters to the editor. As an example, here is a letter written by Sue Cole, one of the then owners of Mary Who? Bookshop:

“I am horrified at the attitude expressed by your ‘cartoon’ (12/9/91) with regard to the Women’s Action Group. These women who are concerned about the exploitation of women and who recognise the very real link between pornography (however soft) and sexual violence are ridiculed and trivialised by your paper. Therefore, Mary Who? Bookshop can no longer support the paper through advertising.”

The Women’s Action Group (a local group of feminists, formed to highlight the increased incidence of men’s violence against women) mobilised and invited concerned members of the community to add their names to a list of people speaking out against violence. Around 100 people added their names to a large advertisement placed in the *Townsville Bulletin* on 6 December 1991. The advertisement also invited women and men to attend a public forum that evening in the Perfume Gardens, to be followed by a Candlelight Vigil.

An earlier example of feminist activism around the issue of men’s violence against women is outlined in a booklet by Ann Rollins, ‘A women’s historical and feminist tour of Townsville’, held in the Townsville Citylibraries Local Collection, as follows:

“In a letter to the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* editor, Catherine Lindt explains: ‘As the wreaths were laid at the Cenotaph, two women walked up with a wreath which had a sign on it. The sign read something similar to ‘In memory of the women raped in war’. They laid their wreath and walked away. As they did so, four other women walked into the cordoned-off area holding signs, and stopped to display them. One of the signs referred to rape as a war crime the authorities never mentioned. As they stood, the women

A precursor to the Red Rose Rallies was an event held in Townsville on 6 December 2004.

This was a **Speak-Out and memorial for fourteen young women who had been killed in Montreal, Canada on that day in 1989 – killed because, the perpetrator claimed, they were feminists.**

This tragedy is known as the **Montreal Massacre** (Blais, Mélissa and Dupuis-Déri, Francis 7 December 2019).

Conducted at the Perfume Gardens, the program featured fourteen speakers.

Each gave a short presentation accompanied by music performed by two young local women.

Judy Small’s song ‘Montreal December ‘89’, written as a commentary on this very tragedy, was also featured.

Each speaker then read the name of one of the women killed, and laid a flower in her memory.

were abused, yelled at, and had their signs torn up by a group of ex-Anzacs. I saw a man attempt to punch one of the women even as the ceremony continued. After the ceremony, onlookers joined in and screamed abuse at the group. Admittedly, the women yelled back, but they did not begin this disgusting display' 30/4/79" (Rollins 1984, section 12).

Small acts of defiance

The feminists of Townsville have never been easily deterred and, in the absence of any noticeable appetite from the media to report on issues seriously affecting women in Townsville, they have had to find ways of being heard.

- Wearing t-shirts with clear messages has been a favourite.
- There was also the very significant 'You Don't Speak for Me' campaign in 1996. Outraged by what they called "the quickly surfacing racism" that was a feature in the lead-up to the federal election on 2 March 1996, local non-Indigenous feminists initiated a campaign in support of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers. As it turned out, many women and men who found the remarks of some politicians reprehensible, were pleased to have the opportunity to demonstrate their objections. Immediately after the election, which saw John Howard become Prime Minister, members of the Townsville Feminist Collective sprang into action with a You Don't Speak for Me campaign. Beginning mid-March and continuing through April and May, individual women and organisations paid for space in the *Townsville Bulletin* to protest against racism with small but powerful advertisements.

The campaign culminated on 25 May with a longer advertisement placed in the *Townsville Bulletin* during Aboriginal Reconciliation Week (later celebrated as National Reconciliation Week):

"We, the undersigned, support the first National Aboriginal Reconciliation Week, 27 May to 3 June. We call for an end to intolerance and a greater understanding between people of all cultures".

This advertisement achieved its goal of attracting 100 signatures. All who signed were very happy to contribute \$10 each toward the cost of the advertisement in order to have their protest registered publicly.

- Another protest action was prompted by the offensive, pornographic images of women on full display in some newsagents. Women armed with stickers saying 'This OFFENDS women' and 'This DEGRADES women' visited the



*Above:
Activism in
a t-shirt*

*Right:
Stickers
sending
a message*



said newsagencies and surreptitiously placed a sticker on as many of the offending magazines as possible.

- Stickers were also used to raise awareness of the sexual abuse of women and children, and public toilets were a favoured place to post these for maximum

effect. Those women involved in this protest would go out late in the afternoon, armed with stickers, and surreptitiously place them in men's and women's toilets.

Townsville's feminists have always responded to patriarchal oppression with radical activism. They celebrated the victories and committed themselves to further action whenever it was deemed necessary.



Feminists in action placing stickers



The getting of wisdom

*– a world of learning, literature
and discourse ...*



CHAPTER 2

SITES OF FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE

THERE was a thirst for feminist knowledge as awareness grew of how much, and how deliberately, women of the past had been rendered invisible by a history written by men. Indeed, in every field, the roles women played were diminished in favour of those by men. Men had taken upon themselves the power of naming so that women's talents and skills were always portrayed as secondary.

There was much falsehood to be uncovered and truth discovered. Consequently, women sought opportunities where they could read, discuss and learn – at universities, at women's bookshops and in feminist discussion groups in the community.

The Centre for Women's Studies at James Cook University⁴

The Centre for Women's Studies was an outcome, site and tangible legacy of feminist scholarship and activism at James Cook University (JCU). It is important to acknowledge that feminist work occurred across the University's academy, administration, associated unions and in student groups and organisations. While capturing all this work is beyond the scope of this account, the focus on women's studies celebrates the efforts of the University as a whole.

Foundations

Universities can create opportunities in communities for feminist scholarship and activism to exist and flourish. James Cook University, established in 1970, created such an opportunity in the Townsville community, attracting feminist

4 Source: Harris and Baker (2008)

academics and providing a place for student led feminist activism. The James Cook Women's Collective was established in the 1970s, a feminist group for women on the campuses – then divided into the JCU campus and the Townsville College of Advanced Education (TCAE) campus. The group sponsored campus events, such as the 'Seminar on Human Sexuality' on 2 June 1979. The event was also sponsored by the JCU and TCAE Student Unions. In the late 1970s or early 1980s, a Women's Room was opened on the JCU campus. Sue Cole, a past JCU student, remembers the room in 1981 as a place for women to gather and "loungue around and talk politics", as well as being a site for conversation and organising events of activism. Sue remembers a backlash against the room, with negative graffiti in the toilets calling it the 'hairy armpit', a name Sue says was claimed with glee by the women using the room! The Women's Room was located near the refectory and Student Union office, adjacent to the squash courts. Inside were feminist books, posters, pamphlets for women's services, beanbags, and tea and coffee making facilities. It was a much-valued women-only space.

In the 1980s, Dr Ros Thorpe (later, Emeritus Professor Ros Thorpe) joined the School of Social Work and Community Welfare, introducing subjects such as 'Women and Welfare' and 'Women's Studies' – an indication of increasing momentum in the academy for a focus on women's experiences and status in society. In August 1987, the 57th ANZAAS⁵ Congress, 'Science and life in the tropics', was held at JCU. The Congress Program showed the depth and diversity of feminist scholarship at JCU. The program documented a Women's Studies' stream with presenters from the academy, local community and other Australian universities. Topics included: Women and social welfare; Reproductive technologies: the invisible woman?; Women in education; Women in science; Black Women's issues; Historical perspectives on women in isolation; and Women on the boundary: spinsters, dykes and harlots – sexual expression and isolation. The Student Union hosted a Women's Studies' event featuring performances, and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Kupmurri. It is worth noting that some of the non-JCU academic presenters were from Women's Studies' programs in other parts of Australia – for example, South Australian College of Advanced Education and Deakin University. Subsequently, a Graduate Diploma of Women's Studies was first offered at JCU in 1990. Many students and staff at the University believed that the time was now right for the establishment of JCU's own Centre for Women's Studies and began working toward that goal.

5 The Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science

Establishing the Centre for Women’s Studies

The JCU Centre for Women’s Studies was established in May 1994 after successful lobbying by Townsville feminist academics and community members. As Dean of Arts, Professor Ros Thorpe supported the establishment of the Centre, as did many other women in the academy, such as the Centre’s inaugural Director, Professor Carmen Luke. A review of the Centre’s establishment documents shows the coordinated and persistent work by academic and community-based women to create a scholarly Centre that focused on women. There were, however, some challenges along the way. The documents include a letter from a small group within the academy arguing that the Centre should be a Centre for *Gender Studies* rather than Women’s Studies. A spirited response against this proposal was successful and the Centre for Women’s Studies was approved by JCU’s Academic Board in November 1993.

Directors of the Centre for Women’s Studies were:

Carmen Luke 1994–1996

Gina Mercer during 1996

Ginni Hall 1997–1999

Nonie Harris 1999–2006

Joanne Baker 2007–2009

Deb Miles 2010–2013

Originally, the Centre was established as an independent entity located within the Faculty of Arts. Community collaboration, interdisciplinary scholarly activities and attention to the unique needs of its geographic location were fundamental principles of the Centre. Its purpose was to provide, through research and teaching, an interdisciplinary exploration

of women’s achievements and roles in society. The Centre’s independence, in its early years, meant that academic and administrative staff from other disciplines were allocated to the Centre. Also, there was a recurrent budget adequate to fund their activities and the Centre was managed by a director and advisory committee.

Challenges and opportunities

The location of the Centre, as an independent, revolutionary entity within the Faculty of Arts, was vulnerable to the conservative economic and philosophical agendas of Australian governments. The growing neo-liberal hegemony brought demands for university privatisation, commercialisation and cost cutting, placing increasing pressure on the Centre’s existence. In 1997, under massive University restructuring, the Centre was disestablished as an independent entity, losing its funding and staff allocation. At this moment of crisis, feminist university staff

sought to save the Centre by relocating it within the well-established School of Social Work and Community Welfare. The resources of the School were now used to support and fund its activities.

This new affiliation with Social Work and Community Welfare provided both challenges and opportunities. The Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in general were particularly vulnerable to cost cutting, and indeed this was the experience of Social Work and Community Welfare. Again, the resources of the Centre diminished. But there were also opportunities for flexible and innovative practice. Women's Studies' preoccupation with the non-academic world and a strong commitment to a structural analysis of social injustice was a good fit with the social change agenda of Social Work and Community Welfare. Staff commitment to, and support for, the resourcing of the Centre were motivated by this vision. Boundary

While the Centre for Women's Studies offered excellent postgraduate options at Diploma, Master and PhD levels, the **Associate Diploma of Women's Studies** for undergraduate students was, for many (across various degrees), the first point of entry into a whole new perspective on the world.

A very popular entry-level subject was: **Australian Women's Studies**.

Lecturers in this subject were made up of staff within the University as well as prominent feminists in the community. Here is a sample (Semester 1, 2005):

Week 1. Introducing Australian Women's Studies – Nonie Harris

Week 2. Australian women's history – Nonie Harris

Week 3. Young women and feminism – Joanne Baker

Week 4. Women and politics – Lindy Nelson-Carr

Week 5. Women and globalisation – Ryl Harrison

Week 6. Feminist theory – Nonie Harris

Week 7. Women and violence – Jude Irwin

Week 8. Women and health – Glenda Darville

Week 9. Body and culture – Joanne Baker

Week 10. Women and work – Deb Miles

Week 11. Women, family, mothers, wives – Patricia Courtenay

Week 12. The local feminist history – Coralie McLean

Week 13. Backlash: what's happening for women now? – Betty McLellan

Collaborating with women's services

In 2006, JCU Social Work academic, Beth Tinning, collaborated with Sera's Women's Shelter on a project – 'Seeking safety, needing support'. Beth authored a companion piece to this project titled 'Dragonfly whispers: the experience of women who have lived with domestic violence and their journey through the Family Court'. The women who shared their stories in this publication connected and went on to provide peer support for women attending Family Court, where domestic and family violence allegations had been denied. These women's work was the precursor to funded support positions in the Family Court.

Beth's work is a powerful example of the benefits of collaboration between the academy and the Townsville Women's Services' community.

After the publication of *Dragonfly Whispers*, Beth was targeted by men's rights groups, leading to the necessity of shutting down her JCU email address.

crossing between academic institution and community was an implicit assumption in this shared endeavour between Women's Studies and Social Work and Community Welfare, and proved to be fertile ground for community collaboration – for example, with the 'Coalition for a Feminist Agenda', a feminist community group (Harris and Baker, 2008).⁶

Preserving the Centre's legacy

May 2024 marked 30 years since the foundation of the Centre for Women's Studies. Professor Debra Miles and Associate Professor Nonie Harris (past Directors) were the keepers of the Centre's records and library, and worried that, when they retired from JCU in 2022, the records and library could be lost. With community members, Coralie McLean and Betty McLellan, Deb and Nonie initiated a conservation project. There were two parts to the project: preserving the Centre's records and preserving its library.

The library was a collection of donated and purchased feminist texts that existed separately from the JCU Library collection. Over 30 years, the Centre for Women's Studies had been downsized several times, moving from its own space with offices and lecture rooms, to a more modest two-room space in another building, and then integrated into the Social Work staff and postgraduate offices in yet another building. As the Centre

6 See <<https://feministagenda.net.au/>>

moved, the library that was a physical affirmation of the Centre's continued existence moved too. The library was important in many ways. For example, it nurtured the research endeavours of Women's Studies' postgraduate scholars, who worked in offices surrounded by the inspiring collection. Once, when a move was on, a male removalist joked: "I wouldn't want the Mrs to see these books" – an indication of how important and potent this library was. Feminist women from the community volunteered to catalogue the Women's Studies' library. Significant texts not already in the JCU collection were donated to its Library. The remaining books were donated to the Townsville Women's Centre.

The Centre's documents and library catalogue are accessible both as a material and digital archive in JCU Library's Special Collections.⁷ The archive also contains audio and video recordings of feminist women who had key roles in the Centre. The archive work was made possible, in part, by a \$10,000 bequest from past Centre Director, Ginni Hall. An important aspect of the Special Collection is that it also includes documents that list academics and community members who lobbied for the Centre, were committed to its feminist goals, and actively participated in the life of the Centre and in the archive project itself.

Feminist postgraduate scholarship

The Centre for Women's Studies provided a foundation for nurturing feminist postgraduate scholarship – a significant achievement in the life of JCU, creating a unique body of feminist research emanating from our Townsville community. In 2024, 42 postgraduate students were identified as completing Women's Studies' degrees. Examples of this postgraduate work are listed below, including degrees undertaken in the associated disciplines of Social Work and Social Policy. A complete list is available in the Centre for Women's Studies at James Cook University Archive. This feminist postgraduate work in turn led to many scholarly publications nationally and internationally.

PhD Theses

'In limbo in the lucky country': the experiences of East Timorese women asylum seekers in Australia from 1990–2000 Rees, Susan; 2001

7 See Centre for Women's Studies at James Cook University Archive <<https://nqheritage.jcu.edu.au/958/>>

With women, for women: a study of women's experiences as workers in feminist organisations	Miles, Debra; 2004
Mothering and attention deficit disorder: the impact of professional power	Rogers, Dianne; 2005
The effects of ideological decision making on the materiality of women's lives: a comparative study of child care subsidy policies and services in Australia and California	Harris, Nonie; 2005
Perceptions, constraints and labour relations: health delivery services to birthing women in rural and remote areas of North Queensland	Croker, Felicity; 2007
Female biology as sacred: Australian women's bio-spiritual experiences of menstruation and birth	Moloney, Sharon; 2009
Telling lies to little girls: the sexual politics of mothering girls	Harrison, Ryl; 2013
Women and the environment: an indicative study on Tamborine Mountain, Queensland	Sewell, Sandra; 2014
Women serving in the Royal Australian Navy: the path towards equality 1960 to 2015	Reghenzani, Christine; 2016
When the bough bends: lived experiences of perinatal anxiety	Powell, Zalia; 2018
Beyond teenage motherhood: navigating life stages and issues of identity into adulthood	Hamley, Jemma; 2022
Exploring social work practice responses to domestic violence against women	Hempel, Vera; 2022

Master's Theses

Women's services and domestic violence	Aisyah, Siti; 1999
Women and political change	Kopkop, Maria; 1999

Indonesian women and career development in Makassar	Muin, Dayati; 2000
Breast cancer: women's voices	Yule, Rosemary; 2000
'You've always got that doubt in your mind': young women's views on dating violence, sexuality and feminism	Baker, Joanne; 2002
Death rights: hearing the voices of older women in the voluntary euthanasia debate	Sceriha, Madge; 2008

How did the education of women make a difference?

"In 1970, when I was a senior student at Pimlico High School, good women teachers were making a difference to how I perceived the world. In fact, they started my thinking as a feminist. I don't remember any direct discussions about equality or feminism but by example they gave hope to young women like myself.

In 2024, having coffee with one of these teachers, Dr Kay Martinez, we discussed the influences (not 'influencers') that prevailed that year and in the next few decades, that gave rise to feminist activism and change in the status quo. We agreed that **the establishment of James Cook University had attracted new and different perspectives to Townsville. JCU established a Bachelor of Education and this led to an academic base of influence in education reform.**

Many women studied to be educators and were passionate about their careers but, while many more women than men were becoming teachers, like so many professions, the males held the positions of power.

School principals and Department of Education employees sitting on influential decision-making boards weren't changing much at all. During the late 70s and 80s a group of women were able to infiltrate these patriarchal structures. Women like Nola Alloway, Pam Gilbert, Gail McKay, Dale Spender and Kay Martinez brought to JCU and Townsville a wealth of research, experience and knowledge and this brought change for the women in education that followed them." *Judith*

Mary Who? Bookshop: A Vital Part of Townsville’s Feminist History

Women’s bookshops played an important role in the Women’s Liberation Movement making feminism more widely accessible and fostering a sense of common purpose among women.

Mary Who? Bookshop, an independent bookstore, was established in Townsville in the mid-1970s. Over the years, it has had various owners, with feminists Sue Cole and Kerry McIlroy purchasing the shop in 1996 and selling in 2024. It has occupied various shopfront locations but has always been in the Townsville city centre – initially in Magnetic House on Flinders Street East, then Atkinson House in Stanley Street and later in Flinders Street in the city heart.

Mary Who? actively and purposefully contributed to Townsville’s feminist movement and activism. As committed feminists, Kerry and Sue used their unique and respected position in the Townsville community to support and further feminist causes. In the early years of Sue and Kerry’s ownership of Mary Who?, the bookshop had a feminist book section. As interest in explicitly feminist content declined in the 2000s, feminist books were integrated into a political section. From 2010, and Julia Gillard’s Prime Ministership, the number of feminist publications and their presence in the store again increased.



*Mary Who? Bookshop in Flinders Street, circa 2023
(Source: Sue Cole collection)*



*Renowned feminist poet,
Gina Mercer, launching her latest book
at Mary Who? Bookshop
(Source: Sue Cole collection)*

The bookshop promoted women's publishing and books, hosting book launches at the shop itself, at JCU and at City Council venues. Partnerships with JCU, the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, and feminist publisher Spinifex Press, enabled Mary Who? to host authors like Anne Summers, Julia Gillard, Anna Funder and Anna Bligh. Local and national feminist authors like Dr Betty McLellan, Dr Gina Mercer (pictured), Margaret Reynolds and Bri Lee have also launched their books there.

Feminists looked on the bookstore as a feminist ally – a safe space for feminist activities. Sue and Kerry hosted women-only events, promoted and sourced women's books, ran a book club where members discussed women's issues, supported local women's services such as the Domestic Violence Resource Service and the Women's Centre, engaged with local press to back women's causes, and supported feminist events like the Townsville International Women's Conference and the Winter Institute for Women.

During this period, Mary Who? was not only a vital part of Townsville's feminist community, it actually helped create that community by "providing a safe space and an intellectual space where women's voices are heard and appreciated" (Sue Cole 2024, pers. comm.).

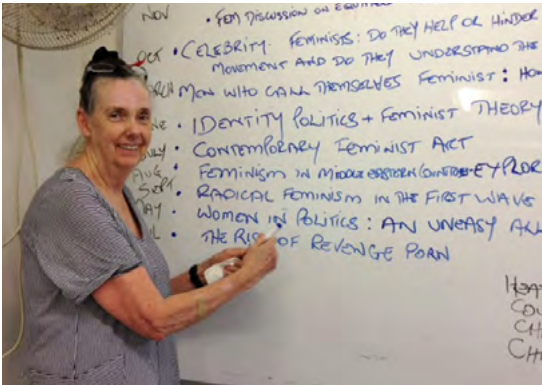
Townsville Feminist Collective

Feminist consciousness-raising groups were fundamental to the international Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and 1980s. They provided a safe and supportive forum for women to share their experiences, and recognise them as part of the broader structures of oppression under patriarchy. Following the successful establishment of the Townsville Women's Centre in the mid-1980s, women identified the need for a separate local group to analyse and discuss topics of particular importance to women.

The Townsville Feminist Collective has been a long-standing grassroots group that has evolved over time, while remaining true to its feminist principles. Commencing in 1987, the early days of the Collective involved some trial and error in terms of how it would function, and it became clear that basic guidelines were necessary. This included the adoption of key elements, such as: a flat structure; that monthly meetings were for the purpose of serious analysis and discussion rather than activism or socialising (although many members were often involved in various external forms of activism); that there would be no cost to members; and that women would take on the necessary functions for the smooth running of the group.



Some members of the Townsville Feminist Collective meeting at the Women's Centre, circa 2010



Pauline at the whiteboard, recording topics for the annual program for the Feminist Collective monthly discussion sessions, 2016

Membership of the Collective has varied over the years, although a core group of exceptional women have been members from the beginning, providing stability, and a wealth of knowledge, experience, and guidance to newer members, while always remaining cognisant of emerging issues. In order to further expand and consolidate their engagement with feminist theory and action, in 2015 Collective members attended a five-session study program, entitled ‘Feminist Knowing’, presented via videoconference by prominent American sociologist and feminist activist, Kathleen Barry.

The monthly discussion topics have reflected current and ongoing concerns. Some common themes have included: men’s violence against women in its various forms; patriarchal institutions and systems of oppression; racism; separatism; war; prostitution; pornography; sexualisation of women and girls; feminist resistance throughout the world; politics; feminist theory and practice; and analysis of feminist books and papers. On occasion, there have been a number of special guests and presenters at meetings, including renowned national and international feminists, such as Sheila Jeffreys, Susan Hawthorne, and Renate Klein.

Dissecting patriarchy is a serious business but there have been opportunities for feminist fun as well! A novel custom created by the Collective was the ‘Croning’ of senior members upon reaching a significant birthday. The Croning Ceremony typically consisted of a special dinner, and a joyful celebration, involving strong (and humorous!) feminist songs and poetry, often written by members specifically for the occasion. The term ‘Crone’ was derived from the ground-breaking work of Mary Daly, who greatly influenced the politics and language of the Women’s Liberation Movement with the release of *Gyn/Ecology: the metaethics of radical feminism* in 1978. Daly reclaimed and reworked terms that had been negatively defined by patriarchy and, in relation to Crone, declared that “[a] woman becomes a Crone as a result of ... having discovered depths of courage, strength, and wisdom in her Self” (Daly 1978, p. 16).



'Joyful Women' – Feminist Collective women performing circus acts, dancing, conducting and singing, encouraged by the leader in the bottom right-hand corner (Drawing by renowned local artist, and Feminist Collective member, Pauline Woodbridge)

More than a discussion group, in so many ways the Feminist Collective has been the bedrock of feminism in Townsville – a key place to go to ‘find feminist community’. Running continuously for more than 35 years, the Collective has provided ongoing support to local women’s services and projects, and members have been able to rely on one another as a constant resource whenever something needed to be organised. This is evidenced by their involvement in many of the activities described elsewhere in this book, as well as a multitude of other social justice and environmental causes.

Feminism has always been a political movement subject to alternating periods of popularity and persecution. Through it all, the true strength of the Townsville Feminist Collective has been the members’ unwavering commitment to feminism, and their enduring bonds of solidarity. The constant presence of this group has permeated and enriched the lives of countless Townsville women, and continues to resonate throughout the wider community.



REFLECTIONS ...

Thoughts from some current members:

- When I find myself feeling overwhelmed trying to make sense of how the world treats women, I know that I can discuss these issues with like-minded Feminist Collective sisters, and come away with a clearer analysis and a renewed enthusiasm to keep fighting for a better world for women.
- Being a member of the Feminist Collective is an act of resistance. In a world that seeks to isolate and divide women it is a chance to come together to share ideas, find connection with other women and make sense of the world. Informed conversations help me name my experiences of patriarchy and create an understanding of a way forward. Feminist Collective provides a light along, what can be, a very dark path.
- When I go to Feminist Collective meetings, I’m reminded that:
 - Feminism is a politics, not a lifestyle.

- The struggle for liberation requires serious thinking, not three-word slogans.
- Feminism offers a way OUT (for all women), not just a way UP (for some).
- Fun and laughter are important tools for the revolution.
- Being a member of the Feminist Collective in Townsville is so exciting. I realise that every month it's the one constant that is always high on my list of things to look forward to. When I'm travelling away, I miss my feminist sisters and the marvellous discussions that we have. I have met so many amazing women. We can experience many emotions and discuss wildly diverse issues all in a safe feminist space. We also have great fun.
- When we started meeting nearly 40 years ago, I never would have imagined that Feminist Collective would still be meeting in 2025, but it is and, in many ways, it has been my lifeline. For me, it has been a safe harbour against the storms of patriarchy, a supportive place to express my opinions and feelings, a rare experience of intellectual stimulation mixed with shared humour, and an inspiration to keep the feminist faith and continue engaging in the fight for justice for all women.
- Greek statesman Pericles (431 BC) said: "What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others" (Parker 2006, p. 118). The Feminist Collective helps me stay clearly focused on our shared vision, using our feminist analysis and passion to achieve political, economic and social rights for women. My long involvement with the Feminist Collective has supported and strengthened my values within a social setting. I am not alone, I am part of the women's movement, and here in Townsville that movement has woven safety, assistance and support into the lives of others with the development of the women's services and feminist activities outlined in this book.

*Where women
connect,
confer,
collude ...*



CHAPTER 3

TOWNSVILLE WOMEN'S CONFERENCES

IN the early days of Second Wave feminism, all over the world, across all societies, women were fighting oppression in a number of ways: raising important issues, developing effective strategies and producing alternatives to the patriarchal system. Such passionate activism always began with women talking together, sharing experiences and exchanging ideas about what needed to be done.

Women's conferences had proved an effective way of bringing women together and Townsville feminists decided the time was right to organise such events here. The early conferences in the 1980s were followed by bigger, and more daring, international events later on.

Early Conferences

Women Taking Control – 1981

This was one of the first women's conferences held in Townsville. In 1980, a call went out through the local media for all interested women to meet together to discuss the possibility of holding a women's conference focusing on universal feminist concerns. Women from all walks of life indicated a keen interest and came to the first planning meeting on 24 October 1980. There were 35 women in attendance at the meeting and 13 apologies were received.

Some decisions were made immediately and unanimously: Yes, we would hold a conference. Yes, it would be a 'women-only' conference. Other decisions were taken regarding dates, venue, workshop topics, and overall theme of the conference. The theme eventually agreed upon was 'Women taking control'. Nominations were

received for membership on the organising committee of this historic conference, with the following women finally elected:

Deborah Colmer, Carol Fisher, Betty McLellan, Debbie McLoughlin, Eve Radford, Sandra Renew.

After much preparation and sustained interest, the conference was held on the weekend of 1–4 May 1981, at the (then) Townsville College of Advanced Education.

Keynote speakers

The first Keynote Speaker was Dr Jocelyne Scutt, barrister and solicitor of the High Court of Australia, feminist and author. Jocelyne had recently completed a term as Research Criminologist with the Australian Institute of Criminology. At the conference, her keynote address was 'Domestic violence and rape'.

The second Speaker was Gracelyn Smallwood (later Dr Gracelyn Smallwood), nursing sister, scholar, and activist for Indigenous and women's rights. At the conference, Gracelyn emphasised the struggle Indigenous women have in Australia to take control of their lives. Her paper at the conference, 'The role of Aboriginal women in Queensland', dealt with the struggle to overcome the effects of oppression.



*Women Taking Control conference t-shirt,
May 1981*

(Artist unknown at time of publishing)

Other highlights of the conference

In addition to the excellent guest speakers, participants identified a particular highlight as the 'Yarning Circle'. Gracelyn and other Indigenous leaders organised

a Yarning Circle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants to attend as part of the conference activities. Non-Indigenous women were invited to observe, but not to speak. According to reports from some of the observers, this was a very moving and enlightening experience.

Another highlight was the range of workshops on offer. There was a variety of important topics available for participants to choose from, for example: Women's health and sexuality; Women and government; Women in the workforce; Assertiveness training; Lesbian celebration; Women and religion; Violence against women; and so on.

After the conference

Conference organisers were delighted with the enthusiastic feedback they received from many of the women who attended, and the requests for more such events in the future. Many indicated that they now realised that it was, indeed, possible (and necessary) that women take control.

Women Building a New World – 1984

Following the success of the earlier conference, Townsville women were keen to further explore the themes that arose and to push their thinking forward. They decided their next conference would do just that.

This was a conference with a big, bold vision: women really could build a new world by talking together, exchanging ideas, developing effective strategies and producing alternatives to the oppressive patriarchal system in place around the world.

This conference aimed at capitalising on the power of women sharing ideas with one another, looking at the actions of past generations of women, learning from their experience and educating themselves in order to educate others. So, by envisioning the world women wanted to live in, and then working to put their vision into action, they would be creating a better, fairer world.

The conference, held from 8 to 10 June at the Townsville College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE), was opened by Senator Margaret Reynolds and the first session was chaired by Dr Betty McLellan.

Keynote speakers

There were three keynote speakers at the conference:

- Margaret Bearlin, Senior Lecturer at Canberra College of Advanced Education. She spoke on the theme of 'Building a better world', drawing on her experience and involvement with women's issues at national and international levels.
- Eve Fesl, Gubbi Gubbi woman from South East Queensland, responsible for the Aboriginal Studies Course in the Arts Faculty of Monash University where she was the Director of the Aboriginal Research Centre. Her keynote address was titled 'Aboriginal women'.
- Betty McLellan, well-known feminist in North Queensland, and a psycho-therapist providing counselling services and courses for personal development. Her keynote address was 'Strategies for a new future'.

The conference was attended by women from all across Australia, and was declared a great success! In fact, it was at this conference that the feminists of Townsville identified the need for a women's centre, and decided it was time to begin lobbying government in earnest for funding to establish such a centre. After much pressure over many months, their dream was realised in 1986 when North Queensland Combined Women's Services (The Women's Centre) received initial funding (see "Chapter 6").



Betty McLellan (left) and Erykah Kyle at the Women Building A New World Conference, June 1984 (Artist unknown at time of publishing)

Conference on Violence – 1988

In response to growing concern in the community about increasing levels of violence, particularly men's violence against women, the Townsville Feminist Collective, the Townsville Rape Crisis Service (*see "Chapter 6"*) and the Townsville Women's Centre agreed that the time was right for a conference focusing on violence. The decision was made to invite Dr Jocelyne Scutt back to Townsville as keynote speaker for a conference on violence, held from 30 September to 2 October at the Townsville College of TAFE.

Other speakers were also invited, with the aim of covering the impact of violence in a wide variety of situations: the violence of war, racial violence, violence to the environment, as well as physical, sexual and economic violence against women.

Keynote speaker

The conference was opened by well-known Brisbane feminist Marg O'Donnell, who then introduced the Keynote Speaker Dr Jocelyne Scutt, barrister and solicitor of the High Court of Australia, feminist and author, who gave the keynote address titled 'Roots of violence'.

Workshop speakers

Workshops were presented by:

- Di Margetts, psychiatric nurse and community worker from Melbourne. Topic: Incest
- Cora Gatbonton, member of the National Women's Consultative Council. Topic: Domestic violence against migrant women
- Jocelyne Scutt. Topic: Pornography
- Trish Johnson, Quaker and peace worker. Topic: Nuclear war
- Erykah Kyle, Aboriginal community worker, Palm Island Women's Centre. Topic: Racial violence
- Yvonne Cunningham, horticulturalist and conservationist from Innisfail, North Queensland. Topic: Violence against the environment
- Senator Margaret Reynolds, Minister assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women, and Minister for Local Government. Topic: Domestic violence campaign.

Program

Following Dr Scutt's opening address on Friday night, the workshop program was organised around three main areas:

Saturday morning: Violence against women

Sexual assault, pornography, emotional violence, violence against lesbians, criminal assault in the home, child sexual assault, feminisation of poverty, and media violence against women.

Saturday afternoon: Global violence

The violence of war, expanding nuclear capabilities, racial violence, black deaths in custody, and destruction of the environment.

Sunday morning: Practical responses to violence

The need for self-defence, effective non-violent protests, saving the planet, land rights protests, demonstrations for peace, saving animals, and Reclaim the Night marches and rallies.

Highlights of the conference

Particular highlights were:

1. **Hypothetical.** A very enjoyable hypothetical was conducted by Betty McLellan involving selected participants at the conference. The theme 'Off the streets and into the homes' raised serious issues about the unsafe environment some women experience in their own homes but, while the topic was serious, the panel responses included many amusing moments.
2. **Gertrude's.** On the Saturday night of the conference, there was a special opening of Gertrude's 'Salon' for Women (*see "Chapter 5"*). The Salon's regular night was Friday (once a month) but the organisers agreed to hold a special event for conference participants.

This very successful, inspiring conference concluded with Senator Margaret Reynolds' paper titled 'Domestic violence campaign'.

Women's Health Summit: Healthy Women, Healthy World – 2001

In early 2001, the Townsville/Thuringowa Women's Community Health Centre (see "Chapter 6"), with help from the Women's Centre, the Feminist Collective and other interested community members, organised a Women's Health Summit in Townsville from 15 to 16 June. The organising committee was drawn from these services and was supported by Women's Infolink (see following pages), and the School of Nursing and the Centre for Women's Studies at James Cook University.

A Health Needs Analysis, titled 'Women's health on the agenda', had recently been completed in Townsville by Dr Betty McLellan (see "Chapter 6") and had shown that emotional and mental health, reproductive health, and menopause-related issues were high priorities for women. These and other current issues were slated for discussion at the summit.

A stimulating and informative program was devised that featured a range of speakers and workshops, but drew particularly on input from the Special Guest Speaker, Dr Lois Bryson, an internationally acclaimed health researcher who had been closely involved in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health.

The level of interest was high and the summit attracted more than 70 women from across Townsville and Thuringowa. On the first evening, the opening Speaker was Lindy Nelson-Carr, Queensland Parliamentary Secretary for Health, followed by Dr Bryson with an address

**"HEALTHY WOMEN -
HEALTHY WORLD"**

2001 WOMEN'S HEALTH SUMMIT

DATE: Friday 15 June, 7.00pm - 9.30pm
Saturday 16 June, 9.00am - 5.00pm

VENUE: Barrier Reef TAFE, City Campus

This Women's Health Summit brings together an exciting program of events, activities and speakers in order to explore and highlight current social, emotional and physical issues pertinent to women's health.

☪☪☪

The program includes a panel discussion of current issues; "When Profit Means Loss..." a Hypothetical, moderated by Betty McLellan; concurrent sessions covering topics from the impact of globalisation, to living with children with ADD, to the historical role of women as healers; and "Speaker's Stone" - a succession of short, single-issue presentations spoken with passion.

Guest speakers include: Dr Lois Bryson, Emeritus Professor
Lindy Nelson-Carr, MP
Anita Phillips, MP

For Further information, phone 47726060

This Summit is organised by
The Townsville/Thuringowa Women's Community Health Centre
With support from
Women's Infolink
and James Cook University School of Nursing and Centre for Women's Studies

*Healthy Women, Healthy World flyer
(Artist unknown at time of publishing)*

At the Speakers' Stone:

Coralie McLean	– Globalisation
Jan Woodley	– Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
Anne Cole	– Mature-age carers of older relatives
Thelma McAvoy	– Black deaths in custody: or, Stolen Generations
Betty McLellan	– Speaking out
Chantal Oxenham	– Grief of a parent
Donna Budge	– Neo-natal intensive care
Mary Norman	– Unequal treatment by the health system
Lyn Wetherall	– Violence in Indigenous communities
Madge Sceriha	– Healthy ageing

titled 'The globalising society and women's health'. Dr Bryson explained that the Australian Longitudinal Study involved more than 40,000 women who were interviewed every 3 years over a period of more than 20 years. The study was concerned with issues of health in its narrower sense, with well-being in its broad sense, and with understanding the situation of women against the wider social environment.

The Guest Speaker on the following morning was Anita Phillips, State Member for Thuringowa. Anita headed a fast-paced morning program that included a 'Speakers' Stone', that is, a series of five-minute, single-issue presentations dealing with a range of pertinent issues.

Longer papers were presented in the form of concurrent sessions, and covered topics ranging from domestic violence, to living with children with attention deficit disorder (ADD); and from the historical role of women as healers, to the treatment of anorexia nervosa.

An hour was scheduled for the lunch break, but rest and relaxation were not really on the agenda at this fast-paced and energetic conference. A dynamic piece of street theatre, *Can Do* (see "Chapter 5"), was presented as part of the lunchtime activities with both entertainment and a serious political message as its aim. The performance outlined the struggle to secure ongoing funding for the Townsville/Thuringowa Women's Community Health Centre and celebrated the work of local women (including State MPs) who made this a reality.

The summit sessions resumed after lunch with an interactive experience that gave participants an opportunity to raise issues and pose questions to a panel of experts. The session was titled 'If women's health were in women's hands' and panel members included: Dr Dorothy Cole, retired general practitioner; Ginni Hall, social worker and Children's Tribunal member; and Jenny Brazier, registered nurse and Family Planning Clinic manager.

One of the supporters of the summit was **Women's Infolink (WIL)**. WIL Townsville was established by the Queensland Government within the **Office for Women's Policy**, Department of Premier and Cabinet, in the late 1990s. **Its focus was on working with the community and supporting women in the region by providing accurate information on the services available to them.**

In Townsville, the office played an advocacy role for women. It also offered classes in a range of areas, such as accessing the internet, writing basic resumes, and so on. In addition, it provided women with a safe space to grab a cup of tea and sit for a while.

WIL was a valuable resource for local women's organisations and formed partnerships with the Women's Centre, North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service, Queensland Country Women's Association, Zonta, Soroptimists and others. It also supported many local women's activities and endeavours and, in particular, was active in promoting and organising International Women's Day events.

Dianne Rogers was Coordinator of Women's Infolink in Townsville from 1999 until 2005 when the decision was made by government to close the Townsville office and provide information solely from Brisbane by phone.

The event concluded with an exciting and informative Hypothetical: 'When profit means loss', moderated by Betty McLellan and including panellists with a broad range of health expertise and experience.

Hypothetical participants were:

Lois Bryson	Emeritus Professor of Sociology
Anita Phillips	Queensland Member for Thuringowa

Lyn Weatherall	Coordinator, Tugulawa Women's Aboriginal Corporation ⁸
Suzy Dormer	Psychologist
Morgan King	Coordinator, North Queensland Combined Women's Services
Mary Louez	Organiser, Queensland Nurses Union
Ros Thorpe	Professor of Social Work, JCU
Thao Dang	Counsellor, Sexual Assault Service
Karen Newell	Social work student
Ann Bunnell	Deputy Mayor of Townsville

Member for Mundingburra, Lindy Nelson-Carr, addressed the Queensland Government on 20 June 2001 noting the success of the recent Women's Health Summit in Townsville/Thuringowa. Ms Nelson-Carr particularly noted the connection between women's health and the health of the community at large, and she congratulated all those involved in organising the summit.⁹

Townsville International Women's Conference: Poverty, Violence and Women's Rights: Setting a Global Agenda – 2002

A number of Townsville feminists had attended international feminist conferences over the years and, in 2001, a small group decided that the time was right for running such a conference in Townsville. At first glance, this seemed an unlikely prospect. It would involve a huge effort in both organisation and promotion, at a time when internet capacity was still somewhat limited and even unreliable in some locations. However, there was a long and proud history of activism in this town, and a particularly strong feminist network already in place and they believed that such a project could succeed.

Betty McLellan, one of the organisers, explains: "We were well aware of the challenges involved in organising a conference in a regional location such as Townsville – so distant from the large population centres in Australia. However, we felt that the need was pressing. More than ever, women needed to come together to discuss

⁸ See "Chapter 6"

⁹ See <<https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/speeches/spk2001/Lindy%20Nelson-Carr%20spk%20Mundingburra%2020010620-1.PDF>>

the escalating effects of economic rationalism, corporate globalisation and male violence toward women and children, and to plan effective feminist responses – in fact, to set the agenda!”

“Women members of the **Townsville Multicultural Support Group Inc (TMSG)** demonstrated their unique citizenship within the local community of North Queensland, when they enthusiastically embraced the conference organisers’ request to participate as volunteers. They welcomed women to Townsville and to the conference. Indigenous women and those from many countries including students and partners of students/staff of JCU, eagerly stepped up to the task. Using their diverse skills of language and unique styles of welcome, **they met women at the airport and shepherded them throughout the conference program and around various sites,** ensuring that women were supported and felt at ease to contribute to conference proceedings.” *Meg Davis, former Coordinator of TMSG*

So, in June 2001, Betty and three other intrepid feminists, Joanne Baker, Coralie McLean and Chantal Oxenham began the planning for the Townsville International Women’s Conference (TIWC), to be held from 3 to 7 July 2002.

However, just a few months into the planning and organising, they, along with the rest of the world, were stunned by the devastating terrorist attack on September 11. Immediately their plans were placed ‘on hold’. Soon, however, it was clear to them that they had to proceed, and proceed with even greater resolve to get women together to discuss male violence and its effects.

While this was to be an independently organised, largely self-funded event, the organisers had support from an ‘inner circle’ of women who gave donations, loans and pledges for seed funding, as well as emotional and practical support. This group would also provide a very important volunteer capacity. In addition, there was an ‘outer circle’ of women, both nationally and internationally, who were invaluable in spreading the word about the conference and offering much needed advice.

There were also some financial and in-kind contributions from a number of local and state-based organisations, in particular, the School of Social Work and Community Welfare, and the Centre for Women’s Studies at James Cook University. These additional contributions were much appreciated as

they made it possible to sponsor women who could not otherwise attend – and this was a conference priority.

The viability of the conference depended on attracting sufficient numbers of participants, so much effort was invested in promoting and publicising the event both across Australia and internationally. An excellent website and logo were developed for that purpose by local woman Jeane Griffiths, and the organisers used a variety of email networks and specially designed postcards and pamphlets to spread the word.

Conference aims and outcomes

Building on the work of other conferences and events, such as the 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995); Beijing+5 (New York, 2000); Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship Conference (Brighton, 1996); and the World March of Women 2000 (see "Chapter 4"), the aims were:

- to promote a strong women's/feminist agenda;
- to focus on corporate globalisation and its impact on women, the poor and other disadvantaged groups and nations;
- to reiterate the World March of Women 2000 themes: the elimination of poverty and the elimination of violence against women;



*Publicity postcard, forwarded to many women around Australia and the world!
(Artwork by Jeane Griffiths, reproduced with permission)*

- to encourage participation of Indigenous Australian women, women of the South Pacific and South-east Asian nations, as well as those from every other country of the world;
- to provide a forum for feminists to analyse and discuss the escalating acts of terrorism being perpetrated around the world; and
- to create an opportunity for all participants to experience solidarity with other women in the battle against increasingly more pervasive forms of oppression.

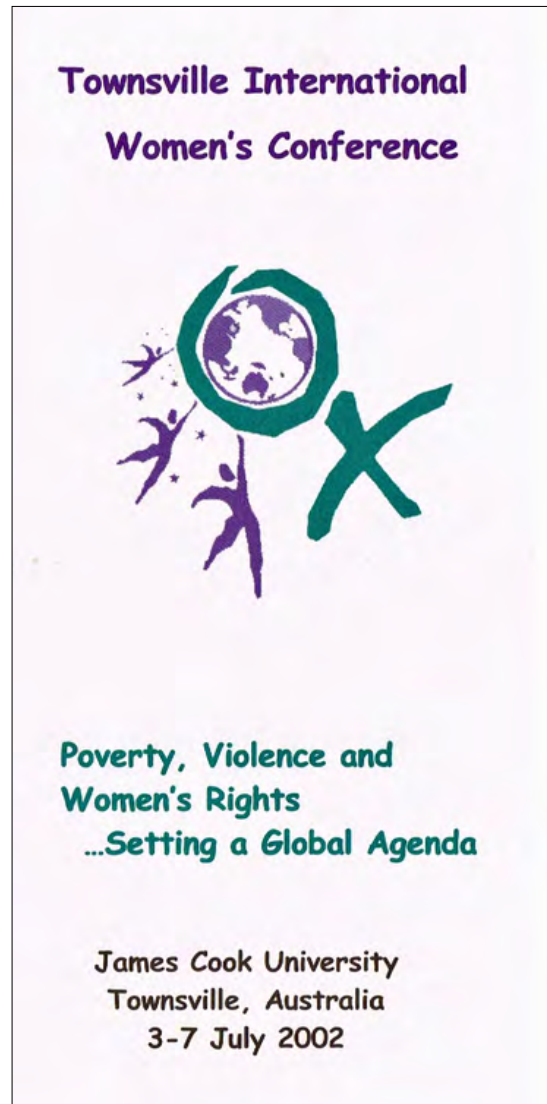
The conference was attended by 420 women from 22 countries – an amazing outcome!

The number of participants and keynote speakers willing to travel to Townsville (a relatively small, somewhat difficult-to-access regional centre) from all across the world would have been surprising at the best of times. In the aftermath of September 11, when travel was made even more arduous and challenging and visas were not readily issued, it was a remarkable achievement.

In the end, it was possible to sponsor, or part-sponsor, women from the Philippines, Nigeria, Indonesia, Romania, India, Pakistan, Vanuatu, Fiji, Uzbekistan, and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia.

The conference extended over four full days and featured 18 keynote speakers, 72 concurrent papers and 12 panel/workshop presentations.

The keynote speakers were from Australia, East Timor, France, Pakistan,



The front cover of the conference brochure

Israel, Vanuatu and Japan. Unfortunately, two keynote speakers, Dita Sari from Indonesia and Nighat Said Khan from Pakistan, were not able to attend the conference due to their visas being denied or delayed.

REFLECTIONS ...

And we never had any doubt ... *by Chantal, February 2003*

An international women's conference in Townsville, a radical feminist conference! We would be able to run our own agenda, feature Indigenous women, put Townsville on the map of radical feminism, raise current issues and come up with a statement to the world.

Until the day of the conference, I could never quite imagine what it would mean to have between 300 and 500 women in a theatre: a sea of women, vibrant, defiant, colourful, eager to challenge, to understand, to laugh and cry, and to feel connected with their past and their future.

Then we had access to the venue and the four of us just stood there trying to visualise the next four days. It was then that I became overwhelmed with a feeling of elation, this was it, there we were and at the same time a sort of disconnection from it all. Was it really happening? How did we do it? The four of us?

Looking back over the twelve months leading to the conference, I can see four radical feminist women, with various skills and strengths, driven by the need to make it work. Nothing else really mattered in that period. We had our usual birthdays, the ups and downs in our lives during that year, but who remembers anything other than 'the year of the conference'?

We knew that the time was right for such a conference. The feminist agenda was being hijacked by the neo-liberal political framework in Australia. There needed to be a regrouping of women, a sense that together we could rejuvenate, refocus on the future. The conference would be exciting and challenging, with keynote speakers who could rouse passion and give participants a connection transcending differences amongst us, who could speak on behalf of all women on the themes of poverty and violence.

Very early on, we received support and donations from James Cook University, the Townsville City Council and pledges from our women friends. Every woman we talked to gave us much encouragement, support and showed a degree of admiration for us embarking on such a venture. Supporting emails from around the world started to come in, keynote speakers said yes, absolutely, I want to be part of this. We knew then that we could make it.

And we needed that knowledge, that inner belief in ourselves to never be distracted from our overall objective with the setbacks we had along the way. Because setbacks and challenges were plentiful: bureaucratic nightmares from opening a bank account to registering with the Taxation Office, to applying for grants. We clearly did not fit the mould: four women, not set up as an association or affiliated to any organisation, whose goal was to run an international women's conference, a one-off event!

We disregarded the less than helpful approach from some organisations and worked with others, friendlier and more attuned to what we wanted to do.

We tried not to panic when registrations were slow coming in or when keynote speakers would take days or weeks to respond to us. What were they doing? Did they not know we wanted a response immediately?

In our various roles, we responded to all emails, enquiries and words of support. We felt we knew all the participants by the time 3 July came about.

Perhaps the reason for never doubting lies with the organising collective. We had this incredible understanding, this absolute trust and respect for each other and a deep friendship to bring it all together.

Keynote speakers

Laura Abrantes and Carolina do Rosario, East Timor	The situation of East Timor women from Fokupers perspective
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Christine Delphy, France	A war for the liberation of women?
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Buried Alive

by Gina Mercer

(Note: Poem continues across 3 pages)

wiry girl in a thin sari
i stand
watching the greedy fire
eat the factory where my mother works
hoping she'll walk right out to hug me
any minute now

but the ash comes
floating around me

Delena Foster, Palm Island Aboriginal Community, Australia	Indigenous women's role as leaders: from a grassroots perspective
Mythiley (Meeta) Iyer, Australia	The unbearable darkness of being: a study of race, culture and gender in violence against women
Imrana Jalal, Fiji	Gender issues in post-coup d'état Fiji – snapshots from the Fiji Islands (a short story of life in the feminist trenches)
Sheila Jeffreys, Australia	Trafficking in women versus prostitution: a false distinction
Renate Klein, Australia	When silence is not golden: the radical feminist dilemmas of not criticising other feminists
Carmen Lawrence, Australia	Poverty of the spirit
Ruchama Marton, Israel	The imbalance between power and responsibility in the Israeli–Palestinian 'peace negotiations': a feminist perspective

soft as cashmere
 hot as fresh rotis
 steals up my nostrils
 steals softly down my throat
 steals all my air, my hope

now i'm one more photo in a glossy
 magazine
 another overseas tragedy for you to
 glance at
 as you sip your café latte
 in the shiny photo
 my face is definite through the lacy ash
 my nose a delicate peak
 my cheekbones thrust their elegance
 through the powder of chemicals the
 multinationals regret

what the glossy picture doesn't show
 is the glisten of my hopes
 mother planned to save enough
 to send me to school next year
 says i'm a bright girl, could go far
 but i got buried alive

before you take another sip
 of your warm milky sweet coffee
 please – yes – you
 please do something
 to stop the hopes of other girls
 being buried alive

gentle girl in a bulky t-shirt
 i stand
 watching the other kids play
 they play open and joyous
 i watch, small and cautious
 hoping it won't happen again

every night that big man
 he comes
 pretends i'm asleep

Boni Robertson, Australia	Untitled
Jocelyn A. Scutt, Australia	Government, law, state – the role of respectable men
Gracelyn Smallwood, Australia	Violence on Indigenous women – here we go again
Marilyn Tahi, Vanuatu	Pacific Women’s Network Against Violence Against Women
Suzuyo Takazato, Japan	A gender perspective on militarism: the work of Okinawa Women Act Against Military Violence
Caroline Taylor, Australia	When men climb mountains while women scale mountain ranges: the gendered valuing of experiential knowledge
Kerrie Tim, Australia	Leading world change – the intersection of racism and sexism
Bronwyn Winter, Australia	Women’s rights, globalisation and the nation–state: are human rights and democracy enough?

does things to my soft girl’s body
 that hurt and rip and bleed
 every night i hope he won’t
 steal into my bedroom
 steal into my bed
 steal into all the tiny places
 every night I hope he won’t
 but he steals my hope every night

can’t see any point anymore
 cut my arm today
 found a sharp-edged shell on the beach
 where the other kids play
 cut my arm fierce and deep
 let out all the stupid hope
 wanting to be an artist
 my auntie, she says i’ve the gift
 but there’s no hope
 when every night
 that big man
 he comes
 steals into all the tiny places
 steals all my hope

now i’m one more statistic in a
 newspaper
 another local tragedy for you to glance at
 as you sip your café latte
 but before you take another sip
 of your warm milky sweet coffee
 please – yes – you
 please do something
 to stop the hopes of other girls
 being stolen

sharp girl in a burka
 i stand
 watching my brother head off to school
 he hates it, rails against the rules
 i yearn to go instead
 to learn the magic of numbers and
 script

Concurrent papers, panels and workshops, Speakers' Stone sessions

There were 75 concurrent papers, 8 panels and workshops, and 8 Speakers' Stones. Topics included: Climate change; Indigenous mental health program; Managing domestic violence policy; September 11, 2001: feminist perspectives; 'The personal is political' as a strategy; The new Stolen Generation; Rural feminist activism; and many more.

Topics presented the state of affairs for women from around the globe and proposed some key steps to address these issues.

Social and cultural program

A varied and stimulating social and cultural parallel program, which drew on local opportunities, was an integral part of the conference proceedings.

It started with a Civic Reception on the first evening (Wednesday 3 July) at the newly opened Museum of Tropical Queensland. The reception combined the conference welcome, music (flautists), a local women's choir, and a special poetry reading (showcasing a poem written for the conference by renowned local poet, Gina Mercer – see this section) with finger food and fun.

On Thursday evening there was an 'Aussie barbecue and performance

to learn the secret of all the squiggles on
his page
but i'm locked out

they say learning is not for girls
i must cook and care and tend the goats
my running brother, he loves to chase
goats
hates to chase meaning on a page
he goes slow, resenting book work
everyday i try to suck his school day dry
try to learn from him what he's learnt
craving understanding
but i'm locked out

in the photo my eyes are dark with
craving
my body is sharp and thin beneath the
black burka
my body's hunger – insignificant as a
lemon pip –
it's my mind that craves the food of
script and numbers
the mind feast you take for granted
as you sip your café latte
and flick through one more story in
your glossy magazine

but before you take another sip
of your warm milky sweet coffee
please – yes – you
please do something
to stop the minds of other girls
being locked out of the feast of
understanding

do something
do something now
to stop the myriad hopes
of all the wiry, gentle, sharp girls
being locked out, stolen and buried alive

© Gina Mercer (reproduced with permission)

under the stars' featuring the Performing Older Women's Circus (POW), cultural dancing, a women's singing and drumming group as well as additional spontaneous contributions from participants. One highlight was the performance of women from Papua New Guinea who treated everyone to their energetic and engaging traditional dance style.

The Strand was the location for social activities on Friday night. Participants could visit the Night Markets and there was a range of eating options on offer. Several entertainment options had also been organised – book readings by the authors in the cosy wine bar at the Blue Bottle Café and Art Gallery, or music by singer-songwriter Anousha on the outdoor terrace of Flutes restaurant beside the sea.

Saturday night saw a 'dinner with a difference'. Tables were reserved at a number of the restaurants situated along historic Palmer Street and participants selected their preferred venue in advance. The Townsville International Women's Conference takes over Palmer Street!

Aussie BBQ

- and -

★ ★ ★ ★ ★
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Performance

Under the Stars

WHERE: On the grass in front of the main Conference venue (HLT)

WHEN: 6.30 - 9pm, Thursday 4 July, 2002
(Buses will depart JCU for the City at 9.15pm)

COST: \$22 (tickets available from registration desk till 1.45pm Thursday 4 July)

FEATURING: Anti-Matter Trash Queens (circus group)
Fusion Dance Group
Dancers from India
Eartheart (drummers)
Performing Older Women's Circus (POW)

PARTICIPATE! ~ CELEBRATE! ~ ENJOY!

(Vegetarian choices available)

The Strand Experience...

WHERE: At the Strand – Townsville's seaside Esplanade

WHEN: 6 – 9.30pm, Friday 5 July, 2002
(Buses will depart JCU for the City at 5.15pm)

VISIT: The Strand Markets with local arts and crafts, entertainment and food stalls

Then,
CHOOSE BETWEEN:

Flutes Terrace Cafe for coffee, cake or light meal
and singer/songwriter Anousha Victoire, 2 sessions–7pm & 8pm

OR

Blue Bottle Gallery and Wine Bar for drinks, coffee etc and book-readings
by authors/poets Gina Mercer, Marilyn Tahi, Susan Hawthorne,
Dorcas Akande (see separate flyer). 2 sessions 7pm and 8pm

OR

Stroll along the Strand, sit beside the sea or check out some of the
other restaurants and coffee spots along the way.

Strand
Park X

X
Flutes

Blue
Bottle X

(Buses depart Strand for JCU via selected city hotels at 9.30pm)

Aussie Barbecue flyer and The Strand Experience flyer

“Dinner with a Difference”

WHERE:	Palmer Street - Townsville's Restaurant strip, near the City Centre
WHEN:	7pm - 10pm, Saturday 6 July 2002
WHAT'S THE DEAL:	Several tables have been reserved in a number of Restaurants and you choose the one that suits. Go with your own group or take the opportunity to make new contacts
HOW DOES IT WORK:	Check out the menus displayed near the Registration Desk and “sign up” before 1.45pm Saturday 6 July.

Metropole	Sciroccos	Totos	Sticky	Anchorage	Bennys	Cactus	Australian	Michels	BlueJean
X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
				X					
				Pasinis					
								X	
								Winstons	

~ Buses depart Palmer Street for JCU via city at 10pm ~

Dinner with a Difference flyer

As well as these organised activities, the conference also provided space for stalls and displays – for information and for the sale of crafts, books and, of course, conference t-shirts and badges.

In addition, there were a number of interesting art and craft exhibitions curated especially for the conference. Sculptures from JCU visual arts students, some select pieces from renowned Townsville artist Anneke Silver, work by other local artists and a very special East Timorese textile display, called *Weaving Women's Stories* which was touring the country at the time. In May of that year, East Timor (Timor-Leste) had become the newest country in the world.

Trip to Palm Island Aboriginal Community (Bwngcolman)

There was also an optional post-conference visit to Palm Island Aboriginal Community off the coast of Townsville. A total of 160 women from the conference

elected to attend this exciting opportunity which coincided with NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) week. The program for the day included a march against domestic violence through the streets of the community, and saw women from across the world joining with Palm Island women to make this protest. This was followed by a public gathering that featured traditional dance and a gracious welcome from Palm Island Council Chairperson Delena Foster, and community Elders.

The whole day went well until the return ferry trip to Townsville. As it happened, strong winds had whipped up the seas and most of the contingent were extremely seasick. While this was an unfortunate conclusion, it did not detract from the overall success of the day.

Conference feedback

Feedback from participants was fulsome and highly positive and indicated that, for example, they were able to share strategies for work and activism with other women, had been impelled to further study and research, and were inspired to continue networking in their own areas.

Here is some of the feedback:

- “the conference was so good, both intellectually and for the soul, that I feel nurtured, and motivated, enthused and energetic knowing that there are so many women out there who are looking so far ahead and are such wonderful human beings”
- “the most remarkable conference I’ve ever attended”
- “certainly the best [conference] we have ever attended”
- “the best conference I have been to (and I’ve been to a few!)”
- “it was good intellectually and for the soul”
- “we are both already reading intensively in many areas where our knowledge has been limited”
- “I appreciated the ‘firing up of the belly’ to get out there and advocate and lobby with renewed fervour”
- “I found the mix of academic with the more personal just right”.



REFLECTIONS ...

Stories from the Townsville International Women's Conference *by Coralie*

From the beginning, one of the dreams we had for the Townsville International Women's Conference was that we would attract a wide range of participants from across the world and that we could find a way to provide some form of sponsorship for those who had few resources for travel. This, then, was the priority for any funds available after essential costs were covered. Early on in the planning process, we had calculated roughly how many registrations were needed to meet expenses and also fund the attendance of a small number of women from overseas countries. We crossed our fingers and hoped that the conference would attract sufficient numbers to make this possible.

As often happens, conference registrations came in slowly initially, more steadily as the conference approached and then in a last-minute rush. We had hoped for 250 conference participants and would have been overjoyed at 300. In the end we welcomed more than 400 participants – a magical number: within our coping capacity (just), ideal for creating the energy for a truly exciting experience, and likely to generate sufficient funds to subsidise overseas participants to an extent we had not dared to imagine.

There was no shortage of wonderful women to sponsor, but the problem was the timeframe. By the time we were confident that we could meet the fares and accommodation costs of some participants, there remained only a sliver of opportunity for these women to obtain visas and tickets and catch flights to Australia. In an ideal situation this would have been challenging. In circumstances where our access to sophisticated technology was limited, and that of our prospective overseas participants was even more problematic (unreliable telecommunications and intermittent internet access), it was daunting. Add to that a global political environment that revealed the nervousness and bluster of a world confronting terror, and closing down in the face of it, and it was a nightmare.

Nonetheless, we persisted with our goal and it turned out that, as well as providing accommodation for quite a few participants, we were able to offer full sponsorship (accommodation and fares) for a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, one woman from Nigeria, one from Romania, three from

the Philippines, and one from Indonesia. We also partly sponsored one woman from India and another from the United States.

Realising our dream of getting these women to the conference was no small achievement. Even now, I look back in wonder that we were able to accomplish it. That we did so is testament to the power of women's ingenuity, persistence and courage – ours and theirs. For each of them, there is a story to tell and, for some, it's a nail-biting, edge-of-the-seat, impossible tale that would sit more comfortably in a work of fiction, or even fantasy, than in a factual description of events.

**Here's how things played out for two of the conference participants.
I'll call them 'Ana' (from Romania) and 'Tani' (from Nigeria).**

ANA

In early May 2002, Ana sent an email to register her interest in presenting a paper at the conference. She also asked if there was any financial support available to assist with her travel from Romania and accommodation while at the conference.

Betty replied on behalf of the organising collective and advised that, even though the deadline for receiving abstracts had passed, extensions were being granted in some instances and the collective would love to receive an abstract from her. Betty explained that, as the conference was funded through registration fees alone, the most that could be offered was the waiver of those registration fees and provision of accommodation for the duration.

Ana immediately responded with thanks for the offer of assistance and an indication that she would try to source financial resources elsewhere. However, despite her efforts, she was unable to secure funds for travel and in late June she advised that, sadly, she would not be able to attend. She was resigned to missing the conference, but would send her paper, titled 'Human trafficking in the Romanian context', for inclusion in the conference proceedings.

This was disappointing news but luckily, by this stage, registration numbers were rapidly increasing and more money was coming in. We decided that, even though the timeframe had become quite tight, we would take a chance and offer to cover the costs of Ana's travel. Ana was delighted and immediately set about making arrangements. She had a valid passport but needed urgently to apply for an entry visa and explore flight options.

There followed a flurry of emails with details being provided and letters of confirmation being sent multiple times, as fax numbers failed to work and internet

access proved sometimes unreliable. Nerves began to fray as time marched on and still no word on the visa request, so Ana decided to travel to the Australian Consulate in Bucharest and present her case in person. She believed this action might assist her application although it did not negate the need for her to forward all her paperwork to Belgrade where visas were actually processed. This would entail postage costs as well as a payment in advance for the visa – so a significant investment of both time and money required. Having done that, all she could do was wait.

Frustratingly, the week before the conference, Ana had still not heard from the Embassy, and she was forced to change her international flight reservations to allow for further delay. These new flight arrangements would result in her arrival at the conference just after it started – if the visa was granted in time.

It was maddening that flights were booked and all that was required was the visa in order to finalise payment for the air tickets. The days passed and still no word from the Embassy, so it was decided that Ana would begin her journey, as planned, on Monday 1 July and would collect her passport in Bucharest, in the hope that it would also contain the visa.

Finally, after an anxious wait, when Ana collected her passport, she was greatly relieved to find that it did indeed include her visa. She emailed immediately to tell Betty the good news and also to advise that the money for the air ticket now needed to be paid to Ana's travel agent as a matter of urgency, and a copy of the bank transfer faxed to them immediately so that the ticket could be issued. This was the last step and it looked to be finally coming together.

However, on this day, Monday 1 July, Betty and the others were on-site at the University, heavily involved in making the final arrangements for the arrival of more than 400 women on campus within the next two days. This meant that she was away from her computer and so, with smartphones not yet invented, she had no access to her emails and no way of knowing about Ana's news or her increasing anxiety as she waited to hear back about her plane ticket

Ana, for her part, valiantly kept trying, sending a series of emails over the next few hours – each one more frantic than the last:

No fax had been received!

Could payment PLEASE be made as the plane was due to leave in a matter of hours and she had no ticket!

URGENT! Now only 40 minutes till departure.

Late that day Betty was finally able to access Ana's emails. While it seemed far too late, she hastily contacted the other organisers, and we resolved to make a last-ditch attempt to get Ana on the flight. With only 35 minutes to spare, Betty urgently emailed Ana with a phone number and asked her to call Chantal who had responsibility for organising conference travel and finances.

We all crossed our fingers and waited!

Ana did indeed manage a frantic phone call to Chantal. Chantal was then able to talk directly to the travel agent, providing payment details over the phone. This did the trick. Consequently, and rather miraculously, at this eleventh hour the ticket was issued and, with only minutes to spare, Ana boarded the flight to Australia!

At last, Ana arrived at the conference as scheduled, to the relief and delight of us all.

TANI

In February 2002, Tani, an academic from Nigeria, submitted an abstract to the Townsville International Women's Conference and also made a request for financial assistance to attend the conference. Her abstract outline was included in the body of an email and she explained that she had been unable to send it as an attachment because of computer problems. This was an early portent of the sorts of challenges and impediments that would arise in trying to get Tani to the conference.

In early May, Betty wrote to Tani on behalf of the organising collective, thanking her for her interest in attending and advising that, while it would be possible to waive registration fees and help with accommodation costs, we were unable to assist with the cost of airfares. She encouraged Tani to try to find an alternate source of funding to make her travel possible.

A short time later, Tani replied, outlining the situation in Nigeria and the struggle she would have to access anything like the funds required to travel to Australia. Her email painted a stark picture of the issues she faced.

She explained that institutions of higher learning in her country had been a casualty of nearly 30 years of military rule and consequently academics there were among the worst paid in the world. She said that her entire yearly salary would not cover the cost of an air ticket to Australia.

Tani said, however, that it was very important to her to fly the flag for women, and regarded our conference as an arena where African women's voices could

be heard. She assured us that she would make every effort to find avenues for financial sponsorship. She would “leave no stone unturned”.

However, by mid-June, Tani contacted us to say it was “finally time to throw in the towel”. She wished us well and promised to send her paper through the mail.

This was disappointing to all concerned, but it was at about this time that conference registrations began to increase, and we believed we could reassess our capacity to assist with travel. Our aim had always been to use all available funds to facilitate the attendance of women from across the world so, with some nervousness, we decided to offer to pay for Tani’s airfares and Betty sent off an email to her.

Tani did not receive this email for some time as her university’s computer service had been down for that period, but when she finally read the email with the offer of travel funds she was overjoyed and immediately began to make preparations.

Then followed the inevitable back and forth of emails as visa requests and travel arrangements were negotiated via an unreliable internet service and within a rapidly reducing timeframe. Tani indicated that she would apply in person to her nearest Embassy – a drive of some five hours from her small university town. Confusion also occurred with the flight booking details being sent via faxes that failed to reach their destination and needed to be sent several times before they safely arrived. Time was getting tight, but while anxiously waiting for all these arrangements to fall into place, Tani maintained her optimism and included encouraging and endearing comments in all her emails:

“Thank you for all your efforts.”

“I say you are wonderful!”

“Keep up the good work and looking forward so much to meeting you.”

For her part, Betty remained committed to doing what she could to facilitate Tani’s arrangements despite these challenges.

At the same time, Chantal was encountering similar problems with her attempts to book appropriate flight connections for what was likely to be a three-day journey for Tani. Communicating the details through the unreliable fax network was a further frustration. It was looking very much as if Tani would not be able to reach Townsville until the final day of the conference – a pointless exercise!

Tani’s emails demonstrated her resolution to overcome these barriers although she again sketched a sobering picture of the issues she faced. She explained that the difficulties with technology and communications in her part of the country were exacerbated in the rainy season when underground cables were flooded for

long periods, affecting phones and internet. Her solution was to travel some four hours to find a travel agent to make the urgent flight arrangements. She assured us that she was confident we would succeed!

Later that same day, Tani sent through a more optimistic email explaining that things were underway, she had been assured that her visa would be ready for collection on Monday 1 July, and she had found a flight leaving that night which would get her to the conference on the day after it started.

In her indefatigable style, she wrote to us yet again at the end of a long day. She wanted to assure us that, in the two days remaining before her departure, she would be finalising her conference paper and gathering the indigenous art pieces that local women had been preparing for her to bring along. She wished us sweet dreams and noted that her fingers were in their “ever-crossed position”.

The crossed fingers clearly worked as, on the following Wednesday, Tani wrote to say that she was in London. On the Thursday she sent another email from Hong Kong and finally, on Friday (Day 2 of the conference), Tani arrived in Townsville.

Over the subsequent days, she involved herself fully in all aspects of the conference and made an important contribution to proceedings via her paper and her overall participation. It was well worth all the effort involved!

Winter Institute for Women Intensive: A Feminist Agenda for the 21st Century – 2004

Following the highly successful Townsville International Women’s Conference held in 2002, the organisers (Betty McLellan, Chantal Oxenham, Coralie McLean and Joanne Baker – now known as the ‘Coalition for a Feminist Agenda’) felt the time was right for another forum that provided opportunities to continue discussion of contemporary feminist issues.

Like that earlier conference, the Winter Institute for Women Intensive was independently organised and entirely self-funded. However, it received valuable support and in-kind sponsorship from the School of Social Work and Community Welfare (including the Centre for Women’s Studies) at James Cook University, as well as from feminist networks in the community.

The Institute Intensive was held at James Cook University from 11 to 18 July. It was an immersive week-long study program which presented an opportunity

for participants to develop a stronger feminist analysis of issues crucial to women in the 21st century. Courses offered aimed to explore the intersection of radical feminism and other radical positions and covered topics such as globalisation, trafficking, feminist ethics, creative resistance, conflict and violence. Course coordinators were chosen for their expertise and national or international standing. In recognition of their generous investment of time, effort and skill, an honorarium was paid in addition to travel and other costs.

The Institute Intensive format was based on the Women's Studies Summer Institute run in Geelong every two years by Deakin University's Australian Women's Research Centre. The model was adapted to suit their needs, and the Institute Intensive was run over one full week, with most external participants electing to stay on campus. There were around 80 participants, mostly from Australia.

The six courses on offer covered a wide range of issues of concern to women:

- the ever-more-entrenched culture of masculinity which condones and supports war but takes little responsibility for refugees and other victims of war;
- increasing levels of violence against women and children in their home;
- globalisation and the widening gap between rich and poor;
- global trafficking and prostitution;
- creative resistance to the culture of masculinity; and
- the role of feminist ethics in analysing and responding to the way things are with a view to contributing to the creation of a new World Order.

Courses

Specifically, the courses on offer were outlined to participants in this way:

Course 1: If not now, when?: envisioning a legal system which prioritises the safety of women and children

Coordinator: Ruth Busch – Waikato University law academic who helped change the face of domestic violence legislation in New Zealand. She has published numerous reports and articles on domestic violence and has been involved in analysing parenting order decisions that arise within the context of domestic violence.

Course description

This course will be critically analytical and also self-reflective. We will analyse the underlying assumptions of our legal systems about violence, and how successful they have been at communicating their stated beliefs that violence against women and children is unacceptable behaviour. Who benefits from the existing legal system? How does that system collude in violence against women and children? In this context, we will look specifically at material on mandatory arrest and charging, no drop policies and restorative justice/mediation initiatives.

We will then look at issues involving contact and domestic violence and question why, given important research findings, prioritising the safety of women and children is not a high priority in contact outcomes under existing laws and within current Family Court systems. We will look specifically at relocation and Hague Convention cases to demonstrate how the contact law literally ‘keeps women in their places’ and ongoingly vulnerable to perpetrators.

Throughout the course, we will ask: What needs to be done now? What have we learned from our experiences of previous decades’ work about the limits of the legal system, the limits of our own analysis, what might work, what definitely hasn’t worked? Also, given that Amnesty International’s 2004 and 2005 campaigns are centred around violence against women, we will discuss what a human rights analysis might bring to the struggle against domestic violence in all its forms.

Course 2: Wild politics: looking at feminism, globalisation and bio/diversity

Coordinator: Susan Hawthorne – feminist, activist, publisher and award-winning writer of poetry, fiction and non-fiction.

Course description

This course will look at the impact of globalisation on women and on the world from a radical feminist perspective. It will include discussions of concepts central to analyses of international politics, of feminism, of ecological issues, and theoretical work from indigenous scholars. Colonisation and its impact on women and on the world will be its starting point, and will include looking at patriarchal methodology, as well as concepts like ownership, privatisation and profit. We will take a detour into understanding how economics works from a layperson’s point of view, and tie this into ideas around land ownership.

The use the land is put to, its sustainability, and how it could be done differently will be discussed by looking at the work of women who are involved in farming, fishing and forestry. Genetically modified foods will be critically discussed, and

we'll go on to look at how each of us participates in the global economy through work and shopping. Patents will be discussed against previous discussions of privatisation and ownership, and how this is played out using women's bodies and indigenous peoples' bodies for commerce. How the World Trade Organisation works and the very intimate ways it affects us. Finally, we will discuss our visions for a radical feminist future. This course is interdisciplinary and international in its approach.¹⁰

Course 3: Challenging the international politics of sexual exploitation

Coordinator: Sheila Jeffreys – a founding member of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia who writes in the areas of feminist and sexual politics.

Course description

This course will look at the ways that the sexual exploitation of women and girls, defined here as: men's acquisition of sexual access to women through payment or the exploitation of vulnerability, poses problems for women's rights world-wide and how it might best be brought to an end. The international sex industry is expanding very rapidly and becoming an increasingly important 'economic sector'. Women's bodies are increasingly treated as a resource to be traded and mined for profit. We will examine the commercial sex industry from pornography and strip clubs to prostitution and the traffic in women, and examine the current debates within feminism over whether prostitution should be understood as violence against women or legitimate work. The course will use international and Australian examples. We will look at associated forms of sexual exploitation such as sex tourism, child prostitution, the mail-order bride business, military prostitution. We will look at issues of sexual exploitation in marriage such as child marriage, forced/arranged marriages.

We will conclude with an analysis of the ways in which the normalisation of men's right to buy women, which is a necessary accompaniment to the growing might of the international sex industry, affects the lives of all women through fashion and beauty practices and sexist advertising. There will be a positive focus to the course because it will be based upon the idea that policies and practices can be adopted to arrest and repair the harms of sexual exploitation. The discussion of solutions will be included throughout.

10 See Hawthorne 2002

Course 4: Feminist ethics in the 21st century: a radical analysis

Coordinator: Betty McLellan – feminist ethicist and psychotherapist with many years of experience who combines an emphasis on feminist ethical analysis and activism.

Course description

What does Feminism stand for at the beginning of the 21st century? And how can feminists become more effective in putting into practice all that we stand for? These are the fundamental questions of feminist ethics. This course is based on the premise that now, more than ever, the world needs a feminist analysis, feminist wisdom, feminist voices and a strong feminist resolve to have our ethic and our agenda included in national and international deliberations.

After a brief look at the history and themes of feminist ethical thought, the course will proceed to open up for analysis some of the current ethical dilemmas facing feminists today. These will include dilemmas around:

- freedom of choice;
- cultural standards and practices;
- religion and fundamentalism;
- working within the system;
- funding for women’s services;
- supporting women unconditionally; and
- developing alliances with other (non-feminist) groups.

Through readings and lively discussion, we will expand our understanding of the issues affecting women at this time, be convinced of the need for a sharper feminist ethical analysis of those issues, analyse the various ethical dilemmas confronting feminism and develop new and more effective ways of intervening to put a feminist future squarely on the global agenda.

Course 5: Bold words, bold women: writing as subversive power

Coordinator: Gina Mercer – award-winning poet, and teacher of creative writing, women’s studies and literature; passionate about words and teaching.

Course description

No-one knows for sure, but it’s a safe bet that women invented language. Sick of being unable to share each other’s stories, sick of men grunting obscurely, they

set about developing the sophisticated system of language we use every day. Of course, since those ancient times we have seen the advent of patriarchy and its shameless use of language to consolidate its power. Naturally, women have long resisted the dominance of “man-made language” (Spender 1980). Women all over the world have spoken and written words of power and subversion. In this course we will dip into that robust tradition and use it as a springboard from which to develop our own skills as lusty wordsmiths.

Wordsmithing is a fabulous craft. The materials – words – are totally free and women can access them anywhere, anytime. Through various focused and enjoyable exercises we will develop our skills as activist wordsmiths. Whether you long to write strong letters to the editor, poetry, reports to melt the hearts of bureaucrats, novels, feminist theories, articles, street theatre scripts or any other form of word construction, this course will hone your creative power over words. It will energise and focus your skill in crafting words so that they will move others to tears, to action, to change the world!

Course 6: Lives in limbo: an exploration of the experience of refugees and asylum seekers

Coordinator: Eileen Pittaway – Director of the Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales, with a major focus on the rape, sexual abuse and gender-based violence experienced by refugee women at risk, both overseas and following resettlement to Australia.

Course description

Refugees experience persecution, torture and trauma, are expelled from their own countries and forced to accept the ‘protection’ of often unwilling neighbours or other countries. They are passed around like unwanted parcels, reviled, demonised, often forcibly returned to situations of danger and even death. Life in camps is harsh, with insufficient food and services in a world suffering from ‘donor fatigue’. The majority of refugee women experience rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

Refugees are labelled and stereotyped, stigmatised and often feared. Yet refugees are some of the strongest, most resilient and resourceful people in the world. They survive against unbelievable odds and maintain hope and courage. Their resilience is to be celebrated. Their plight is an international shame.

This course will examine many aspects of the refugee experience, including the root causes of refugee generation and forced people movement; the difference

Meg Davis, who was the coordinator of the **Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG)** at the time, reflects:

“TMSG representatives who participated in the Institute Intensive were particularly grateful to attend a keynote address and workshop conducted by Dr Eileen Pittaway on **a feminist perspective of the experiences of women asylum seekers and refugees.**

We gained wonderful insights that added to our understanding of women refugee experiences prior to resettlement. We also gained skills that contributed to ongoing advocacy to support resettlement in the unique location of North Queensland.

It was the beginning of an enduring professional partnership with the Centre for Research and a pathway for local former refugee women to contribute to international dialogues with former refugee women’s groups around the world.”

between refugees, asylum seekers and migrants; and their status in International Law. It will also examine the notion of ‘international protection’ with particular reference to refugee women and children. Peace and conflict resolution techniques will be examined to understand what value these might have for refugees at various stages of their journey.

Film, art and poetry will be mixed with academic debate and group exercises in order to explore the subject as creatively as possible.

Keynote speakers and Feminist-in-Residence

To augment the core coursework, the Winter Institute for Women Intensive scheduled a series of keynote and special guest speakers. Over the course of the program, each of the course coordinators delivered a keynote address related to their specialist subject. In this way, the whole assembly had some exposure to all of the topics on offer.

There was also a ‘Feminist-in-Residence’ role – a unique feature of the program. In this role, the Feminist-in-Residence attended each of the courses in turn, thus providing an opportunity for all to have input from a guest speaker of international repute.

The Official Welcome was delivered on the first evening by Professor Janet Greely, Head of School, Social Work and Community Welfare, James Cook University. Keynote speakers and special guest lectures were

scheduled for each afternoon of the Institute Intensive and these sessions were also open to the public.

In addition to the Course Coordinators, other invited speakers were:

Keynote Speaker/Feminist-in-Residence: Dr Patricia McFadden, Visiting Scholar at Five Colleges Women's Studies Research Centre, Mount Holyoke College, Amherst, Massachusetts

Dr Patricia McFadden, sociologist, activist, feminist academic, writer and publisher from Zimbabwe, has spoken around the world on issues such as: the African Women's Movement; the struggle for reproductive and sexual rights and health; and the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on women's struggles for sexual and civil freedom.

Title of Keynote: African feminist interpretations of post-coloniality

Detailed Program ~ Winter Institute for Women ~ 11 - 18 July 2004

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
10-12.30		Course work	Course work	Course work Patricia McFadden Guest in Course 2 (Susan Hawthorne)	Course work Patricia McFadden Guest in Course 3 (Sheila Jeffreys)	Course work Patricia McFadden Guest in Course 1 (Ruth Busch)	Course work	Final Keynote Session International Voices Panel "A Feminist Agenda for the 21st Century - a vision for the future". ~ Moderator: Pauline Woodbridge Concluding remarks
12.30-2.00		Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Farewell Lunch on the Lawn
2.00-4.00		Course work Patricia McFadden Guest in Course 4 (Betty McLellan)	Course work Patricia McFadden Guest in Course 5 (Gina Mercer)	Free	Course work	Course work Patricia McFadden Guest in Course 6 (Eileen Pittaway)	Course work	
4.00-4.30	Registration (until 5.00pm)	Break	Break		Break	Break	Break	
4.30-6.00	5pm Inaugural Institute Session Opening remarks: Nonie Harris Introduction & Keynote address: Betty McLellan, "Shouting through the Silence: An Issue for Feminist Ethics"	Keynote Session Official welcome: Janet Greeley, JCU Opening Speaker: Susan Hawthorne, "Wild Politics: Feminism and Globalisation" Special Guest: Jeannie Herbert, "My Right to Choose! Does being 'female' nullify cultural difference?"	Keynote Session Opening Speaker: Sheila Bunwaree, "Globalisation, Peace and Development - a Feminist Perspective" Keynote address: Sheila Jeffreys, "The Traffic in Women: Human rights violation or migration for labour?"		Keynote Session Opening Speaker: Eileen Pittaway, "Lives in Limba - the experience of refugees and asylum seekers" Keynote Speaker: Feminist-in-residence Patricia McFadden, "African Feminist Interpretations of Post-Coloniality"			
6.30						Bus departs JCU	Pre-dinner Drinks/nibbles	
7.00						Readings at Mary Who Bookshop by Gina Mercer	Institute Dinner After Dinner Speaker: Ruth Busch	

The Winter Institute for Women Intensive program

Special Guest Speaker: Professor Jeannie Herbert, Chair of Indigenous Australian Studies at James Cook University, Townsville

Professor Jeannie Herbert, Head of the Indigenous Unit at James Cook University, has worked in education for many years, in Australia and overseas, in the classroom and in educational administration, training and curriculum development.

*Title of Keynote: **My right to choose! (Do we have common ground? Does being 'female' nullify cultural difference?)***

Keynote Speaker: Dr Sheila Bunwaree, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Mauritius

Dr Sheila Bunwaree, Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Mauritius, has headed the Gender Bureau of the Ministry of Women's Rights and has also been a member of various gender networks in the Africa region and overseas.

*Title of Keynote: **Globalisation, peace and development – a feminist perspective***

Social program

While participants spent most of the time with their chosen study group, the Institute Intensive organisers were keen to ensure that there were opportunities for connecting and networking across courses. To that end, a 'nerve centre' was established in one of the university common rooms where women could congregate and connect. Bookstalls, art and craft tables, local information and coffee were available throughout the day.

The Institute Intensive commenced with registration and a casual social gathering on the first evening. There was wine and cheese and finger food, with entertainment provided by a young women's drumming and fire twirling ensemble.

Most participants were accommodated in one of the on-campus colleges where dinner was provided each night in the college dining hall and sometimes accompanied by light entertainment. On one of these occasions, music was provided by a talented young local flautist, Marlina Whop. This was also the venue for the formal conference dinner with Guest Speaker, Ruth Busch.

Another organised event involved an evening at Mary Who? Bookshop in the city. Participants were treated to a special book reading by Gina Mercer, one of the course coordinators, and other creative presentations.



Flyer of suggested sightseeing and activities around Townsville

While coursework was scheduled for several hours each morning and afternoon during the program, there was one free afternoon allocated so that participants could enjoy what Townsville had to offer. Information about options for sightseeing and suggested activities was provided.

The Winter Institute for Women Intensive concluded with a farewell alfresco 'Lunch on the lawn'.

Conclusion

While providing a different type of experience from the Townsville International Women's Conference which preceded it, this Institute Intensive was also seen as highly successful. It provided a rare and rewarding experience for participants who embraced the opportunity to delve more deeply into some pressing contemporary feminist issues.

International Feminist Summit:

Women of Ideas: Feminist Thinking for a New Era – 2007

The International Feminist Summit was the third in a series of events organised by the Coalition for a Feminist Agenda. While different in style and process to the earlier forums, the summit proved to be an equally stimulating and exciting framework for feminist thinking. At that time, the term ‘summit’ was in popular usage to describe high-level international talks, and it was chosen for this event as an appropriate way to describe its engagement with some of the most serious issues confronting women in the 21st century.

The summit recognised the urgent need to promote women’s ideas, to provide platforms for women to share their analysis of the world, and to insist that women’s voices be heard alongside those of men in national and international arenas. The aims were:

- to promote a strong women’s/feminist global agenda;
- to resist the present worldwide practice of silencing women’s voices;
- to bring into sharp focus the current themes of 21st century feminism;
- to provide a forum for feminists to discuss and analyse escalating acts of brutality being perpetrated around the world; and
- to create an opportunity for all participants to experience solidarity with other women in the battle against increasingly more pervasive forms of oppression.

Focus and approach

In keeping with the breadth and diversity of the theme, the Coalition collective set out to bring together keynote speakers to cover a variety of perspectives under six broad topics:

- **militarism and violence** (incorporating issues such as militarism, domestic and family violence, war, terrorism, torture, rape, sexual abuse of children, sexual slavery, torture of lesbians, racism, refugee issues, fundamentalism);
- **identity and citizenship** (incorporating issues such as women’s citizenship, indigenous experience, lesbian knowledge, racism, multiculturalism, colonisation, exile, exclusions, diversity, women in prison);
- **sexual exploitation** (incorporating issues such as sexual exploitation, pornography, prostitution, trafficking for sex, cosmetic surgery, reproductive

issues, media images, fashion, popular culture);

- **ethics and power** (incorporating issues such as ethics, power, international relations, women's speech, exclusion, politics, decision-making, women's human rights);
- **globalisation** (incorporating issues such as economic globalisation, trade, poverty, resources, oil, food production, drug-dumping, sustainability, reproductive issues, women's health);
- **21st century activism** (incorporating issues such as feminist activism, feminist history, global feminism, environmental issues, alliances, creativity, women's culture).

INTERNATIONAL FEMINIST SUMMIT

Townsville, AUSTRALIA
17 - 20 July 2007

"Women of Ideas: Feminist Thinking for a New Era"

This feminist event is for all women who denounce the escalating violence and oppression that mark the 21st Century, who rage against the continued exclusion and silencing of women throughout the world, and who are convinced that a strong feminist response is essential for the creation of a fairer future.

THEMES:

- *MILITARISM & VIOLENCE
- *SEXUAL EXPLOITATION
- *GLOBALISATION
- *ETHICS & POWER
- *IDENTITY & CITIZENSHIP
- *21ST CENTURY ACTIVISM

Featuring International and Australian speakers:

Catharine MacKinnon (US)	Sheila Jeffreys (Aus)
RAWA (Afghanistan)	Florence Onus (Aus)
Farida Akhter (Bangladesh)	Betty McLellan (Aus)
Shamima Ali (Fiji)	Judy Horacek (Aus)
Purna Sen (UK)	Susan Hawthorne (Aus)

For more information:
www.feministagenda.org.au/Summit/summitIndex.html

Organised by the **Coalition for a Feminist Agenda**
in conjunction with Women's Studies Centre, James Cook University,
and Townsville Women's Services

International Feminist Summit flyer

Format

The summit was a conference with a difference! It aimed to offer a highly stimulating, high-energy program with a variety of speakers – experts in their fields – from Australia and overseas, and a format that allowed for different styles of presentation and interaction. As well as keynote speakers, there was a range of other presentation options on offer. Rather than breaking into small workshop groups, most sessions were delivered to the entire group.

Presentation options were:

1. Point of view: A five-minute presentation intended to be a short sharp opinion piece. This was an opportunity for presenters to be dynamic, creative, passionate and focused.

2. Short paper: A ten-minute paper intended to allow for the development of ideas. This was an opportunity to present arguments on any area of feminist thought and activism related to the themes of the summit.
3. Thinking aloud: A unique, alternative opportunity to present ideas at a special event scheduled at the end of each full day of the summit. Keynote speakers and selected participants engaged in an interactive exchange aimed at further exploring significant ideas raised throughout the day. This option provided participants with an opportunity to ‘think on their feet’, without prior preparation.

Keynote speakers

Farida Akhter – an internationally acclaimed feminist activist and publisher from Bangladesh. Farida has headed many women’s groups. She has written extensively critiquing the population control measures in Bangladesh and has been an active member of the Feminist International Network for Resistance Against Reproductive Technologies and Genetic Engineering (FINRRAGE).

Title: Seeds as the site of strategic resistance

Shamima Ali – Coordinator of the Fiji Women’s Crisis Centre (FWCC), Fiji Human Rights Commissioner and chair of the Pacific Women’s Network Against Violence Against Women. Shamima has advocated for women throughout the Pacific Region and has been the recipient of a number of prestigious awards for her work in the area of violence against women and children.

Title: Militarisation and women’s rights in Fiji and the Pacific

Unfortunately, Shamima was unable to attend the conference. Her keynote address, however, was read to the summit, much to the appreciation of all participants.

Susan Hawthorne – poet, novelist, publisher (Spinifex Press) theorist and aerialist. Susan has been a long-time activist who has also worked in academia across a number of disciplines.

Title: Heteropatriarchy: globalisation, the institution of heterosexuality and lesbians

Judy Horacek – Australian freelance cartoonist, printmaker, writer and illustrator. Judy’s cartoons, with their strong sassy female characters, have appeared on fridge doors all over the world and a number of them have become feminist classics.

Her work has been widely published in newspapers, journals and books and also appears on tea towels, aprons and greeting cards.

Title: I am woman, hear me draw

Sheila Jeffreys – founding member of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women Australia (CATWA). Sheila taught sexual politics, lesbian politics and international feminist politics at the University of Melbourne. She has written and spoken internationally on aspects of sexual exploitation.

Title: Feminists and the international sex industry: cheerleaders or critics?

Catharine MacKinnon – lawyer, teacher, writer, activist and one of the most formidable legal minds in the United States. With Andrea Dworkin, she conceived and wrote laws recognising pornography as a violation of human and civil rights. Representing Bosnian women survivors of Serbian genocidal sexual atrocities, she established legal recognition of rape as an act of genocide. She has been widely published in many languages.

Title: Women's status, men's states

Betty McLellan – ethicist, author, psychotherapist and committed activist of long standing. Betty's focus has been deliberately local and global. Working with others to create a solid feminist core in Townsville, she has also maintained a radical commitment to global feminist activism.

Title: Feminism: a spent force or still a force to be reckoned with?

Florence Onus – media specialist with the Townsville Aboriginal and Islander Media Association (TAIMA) and former lecturer in Indigenous Australian Studies at James Cook University. Florence is the fourth generation of women from her family who have suffered removal from land, culture and family. She is a survivor of the Stolen Generation and her maternal grandfather died in custody in the early 1960s following his arrest as an agitator. Consequently, Florence has a burden and passion to continue the fight for social justice, with a particular focus on the impact of Black Deaths in Custody and Stolen Generation issues.

Title: Indigenous Australians plight from denizens to citizens 1967–2007

RAWA – the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan is an independent political/social organisation of Afghan women fighting for human rights and social justice in Afghanistan. In addition to political agitation, RAWA's focus

has been on providing education, health and income generation for women. RAWA sent a representative of the organisation to the summit.

*Title: **Resisting fundamentalism***

Purna Sen – Amnesty International’s Director for the Asia-Pacific region. Previously, Purna was lecturer in Gender and Development at London School of Economics. Her research, writing and activism focus on the areas of violence against women, human rights, sexual violence and trafficking. She has worked with women in India, Jordan, Morocco, the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom.

*Title: **Loudly, quietly, separately and together: every which way***

Meg Davis recalls:

“Local women associated with **Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG)**,

including Indigenous women and women from Sudan, Liberia, Tokelau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines and Malaysia, **formed a choir for the specific purpose of welcoming women to the Feminist Summit.**

Feminist songs were sung with gusto and pride in diverse languages at the summit’s opening.

The delight of the audience encouraged a later CD recording, and photos of the performance are included in a history of TMSG.”

(See Frazer and Beplate 2018)

Display space/stalls

Space was available during the summit for the display and/or sale of information products, books, artwork, handcrafts, and so forth.

Social program

The summit began with a Civic Reception, sponsored by the Townsville City Council, and held at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Centre. Finger food was available. Special entertainment was provided by Oolgamun Julbu Julbu, an Indigenous women’s dance troupe, and the Townsville Multicultural Women’s Choir.

The social program included a Conference Dinner. Judy Horacek was the after-dinner Speaker, presenting her very entertaining keynote address at this event. This was followed by music and dance.

Summit evaluation

The International Feminist Summit was considered a great success by participants and organisers alike, with 220 participants

from 14 different countries attending. The experimental format of the summit worked well and attendees took good advantage of the different options for participation. Again, one of the secrets of the event's success was the support and assistance provided by the large circle of local women and organisations who willingly donated their time, effort and ideas.

REFLECTIONS ...

Elodie Oxenham, young local feminist, recalls some conference highlights:

I remember this summit very fondly! The highlight for me has to be introducing Judy Horacek. Looking back, this was such a gift given she is an amazing trail-blazer for women in Australia.

When I think about this feminist event, I feel strong and connected to a movement of women by women, and for women!!

In particular, I spent time with the representative from RAWA (the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan). She explained to me that she had to use a pseudonym while in Australia, and faced scrutiny and possibly personal attacks upon returning for attending the summit. Her ability to calmly and clearly share her feminist analysis and describe what women and girls were experiencing in her country has stayed with me all these years.

The Feminist Summit gave me the opportunity to think deeply about ideas of 'choice' in a pervasive patriarchal structure, and the need to work together as women to build a better world. Doesn't matter where you are from – let's work as a team.

Sydney feminist, Betty Green, reflects on her experience of being part of a number of the conferences held in Townsville over the years:

Attending the Townsville International Women's Conference 2002 was the beginning of an inspirational journey of connection to activists and advocates across the country and across the globe. In reflecting on the experiences, connections and friendships built and enduring from that time in 2002, it is no exaggeration to consider it was indeed a life-changing event.

When I think of the vibe of feminist agenda events in bringing us together to think, to network, to exchange and debate ideas, to be angry together, to mourn women killed in domestic violence – it's all very powerful, connecting with a body of women of like mind and passion – to further the feminist project.

The feminist luminaries I have listened to, spoken with, and corresponded with include Jocelyne Scutt, Ruth Busch, Bronwyn Winter, Renate Klein, Susan Hawthorne and Betty McLellan. And how exciting to have had the chance to hear Catharine MacKinnon – something I deeply appreciated as I read and wrote on feminist theories of the state in exploring feminist activist engagement with the state for my thesis.

It's also important to note the creation of feminist agenda online discussion group (f-agenda) which was established post the 2002 Townsville International Women's Conference to continue this feminist community, providing an online place of connection, discussion, and learning.

This opportunity to reflect renews a deeply felt appreciation for the work and efforts of the Townsville-based Coalition for a Feminist Agenda in inspiring generations of activists and reigniting the passion.

Thank you to all.





*A feminist
smorgasbord ...*

CHAPTER 4

COMMUNITY PROGRAM: LECTURES, FORUMS, SEMINARS AND WORKSHOPS

In the 1980s and 1990s, women across Australia were looking for opportunities to get together for serious feminist discussion. This was particularly true for women living in North Queensland which, in the days before the internet, felt remote and cut off. There was a sense that they were missing out on all the activities that they presumed were happening in the capital cities thousands of kilometres away.

The women of Townsville knew that, if they were to have opportunities to expand their knowledge and involvement with feminist ideas, they would have to create those opportunities for themselves. So, they did. They organised conferences, workshops, debates, group discussions ... anything that would provide an opportunity for women to come together to consider the important issues being raised by feminist analysis.

One of the early activities was a weekend camp with the intriguing title 'Feminist survival'. In November 1985, members of the Townsville Women's Centre Collective (which became the 'Townsville Feminist Collective' once funding had been secured for the establishment of the Women's Centre) organised a weekend workshop on Magnetic Island and invited all interested women to register. The flyer read:

The **Townsville Women's Centre** invites all women interested in feminism, and in how to survive as a feminist in today's society, to attend a weekend workshop at Nelly Bay on Magnetic Island.

Describing the purpose of the weekend more fully, the flyer explained:

The program has been constructed in such a way as to allow plenty of time for women to talk about everyday problems and concerns and, also, on the more positive side, to discuss ways of confronting those problems assertively and productively.

We have chosen the theme *Feminist survival* to indicate our intention to survive, regardless of the forces in society that try to mould us into the kind of women we 'should' be.

This workshop was a real success in terms of participants' increased self-esteem, improved confidence and ability to be assertive, as well as an expressed determination to stand up against patriarchal oppression of women in all its forms.

Winter Institute for Women: 1989–1997

The success of the 'Feminist survival' workshop inspired other creative ideas. Local feminist and psychotherapist, Betty McLellan developed an exciting initiative that she called the 'Winter Institute for Women'. Every August, from 1989 to 1997, Betty prepared a program of courses, lectures, weekend workshops and discussion groups and invited women to sign up for whatever interested them. The uptake was amazing!

Special guest speakers

An exciting aspect of the institute was that high-profile feminists, nationally and internationally, did not hesitate to accept invitations to come as special guest speakers.

1989 – Jude Abbs	Marriage can be a health hazard
1990 – Renate Klein	Reproductive and genetic engineering: a woman-centred perspective on the new and the old
1991 – Dale Spender	Talking comfort: women's language strengths
1992 – Sheila Jeffreys	The politics of sexual pleasure
1993 – Gisela Kaplan	Women and power, and women's power
1994 – Janice Raymond	Trafficking in women, children and foetuses: feminist outrage
1995 – Judy Horacek	Women's humour: a challenge to patriarchy

- 1996 – Barbara Flick Women rising to the challenge – the role of Indigenous Health Councils in the present political climate
- 1997 – Marilyn Waring Human rights and women’s citizenship



The Feminist Alternative

Telephone (077) 72 6060

99 Charters Towers Road, Hermit Park, Townsville 4812

Co-ordinator: Betty McLellan B.A., M.A., Ph.D., Dip. R.E.

All correspondence to:

PO Box 688, Townsville Q. 4810

SEVENTH WINTER INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN AUGUST, 1995

It's hard to believe the Winter Institute for Women is in its seventh year - and still going strong! Preliminary indications are that there is even more interest in this year's events than ever before.

For those who aren't aware of the central aim of the Institute, I'm pleased to say it remains the same as when it was established in 1989: to provide women in the isolated north with a unique opportunity to consider some of the important issues that affect our lives, from the perspective of the most recent feminist research and writing.

This year's programme includes:

WORLD 'SERIOUS' DEBATING. This is opening night. Don't miss this fun-filled evening when six "prominent" Townsville personalities will debate a topic designed to draw attention to the need for a greater representation of women in State and Federal parliaments. Each team in the debate will consist of two women and one man.

Patterned on the ABC's World Series Debating, this event will be unique to Townsville and it, therefore, goes without saying that it will be clever and funny and very enjoyable.

While the Winter Institute is usually of interest to women only, this particular event is open to women and men.

SPECIAL GUEST. This year, our special invited guest is Australian Feminist writer and cartoonist, **Judy Horacek**. Those of us who attended the Sixth International Feminist Book Fair in Melbourne last year were very impressed with Judy's input and presentation, and are thrilled to have her as our guest here in Townsville.

Guest Lecture. Here, Judy will address the issue of women's humour and its power to challenge oppressive patriarchal structures and practices.

Weekend Workshop. Every year, about fifty women of all ages and with differing interests, join together for a live-in weekend workshop. It's an amazing event, where new friendships are developed, old friendships are strengthened, serious issues are discussed and the participants have a really good time. Whatever you do, don't miss it.

This year, Judy Horacek will provide us with a unique opportunity to discuss feminist issues around women's humour and, also, to learn the practical art of cartooning.

A BRIEF COURSE. This course, led by me, will give us the opportunity to discuss one of the important contemporary feminist debates: Is Feminism in the 90s simply a lifestyle choice, or is it still a political movement?

WINTER INSTITUTE DINNER. This final event, coordinated by Coralie McLean, will give us an opportunity, over dinner, to focus attention on another particularly fiery debate raging in Australian feminist circles at this time. The debate, about what constitutes sexual harassment, has been sparked into an inferno in recent months by Helen Garner's book: *The First Stone*.

Over the page you'll find a more detailed description of events, plus registration form. I hope you'll register for everything, but if that's not possible, please do register for as many of the events as you can manage.

Since I'm a little late getting the bulletin out this year, it would be great if you could send your registration in very quickly. I look forward to receiving it.

Betty McLellan



Betty McLellan

*Winter
Institute
for Women
program*

Weekend workshops

A popular feature of the institute each year was a weekend workshop – an opportunity for women to pack their bags and get away for a weekend of feminist discussion mixed with a lot of fun and laughter.

They even formed a 'feminist choir'. And while no one was able to boast superior musical abilities, members nevertheless displayed plenty of passion and commitment in their rendition of favourite feminist lyrics – and the important thing to them was that they were making music together.

Sometimes a workshop would be held at a venue on beautiful Magnetic Island (a 20-minute ferry ride from Townsville) and, other times, it was held at a venue up in the hills, at Crystal Creek (a 40-minute drive from Townsville).

Each year, workshops attracted around 50 participants. What was the point of women getting together 'by themselves'? The point was, as all women knew (and still know), that time together with other women outside the confines of patriarchal expectations, is both freeing and empowering.

Here are some of the themes that the women who registered for the workshops found irresistible:

- 1990 – Feminism and women's friendships (led by Renate Klein and Susan Hawthorne)
- 1991 – Laughing and singing at the revolution (led by Dale Spender)
- 1992 – We've only just begun: feminism confronts the backlash (led by Betty McLellan)
- 1993 – Feminism now! (led by Gisela Kaplan and Lesley Rogers)
- 1994 – Women's stories: the place of story in the construction of female identities (discussion and sharing of stories)
- 1995 – Revolutionary wit and wisdom (led by Judy Horacek)
- 1996 – Activists write creatively too! (one-day workshop, led by Gina Mercer)
- 1997 – Valuing women (led by Marilyn Waring)

Dinners with a difference

On three occasions, the institute's August program included a 'dinner with a difference'. Again, these were very popular events. Who could resist sharing with other women an evening of delicious food, lively discussion of a recently released feminist book, stories, poetry and music?

- 1993 – Exploring feminist ideas together – a night of revolutionary revelling (led by Coralie McLean)
- 1995 – Sexual harassment: how much is too much? (A discussion of Helen Garner's *The first stone*, led by Coralie McLean)

1997 – Fine food and feminist culture
(led by Gina Mercer)

Courses, panels, debates, discussions

Every year, the Winter Institute for Women included courses, speak-outs, debates, panels, and so on. A debate of note in 1995 was called “World ‘Serious’ Debating” and the topic chosen was ‘A 35% quota for men would greatly improve Australian politics’.

The Mayor of Townsville, Mike Reynolds, and Deputy Mayor Ann Bunnell agreed to be speakers on opposing sides of the debate. Members of the debating teams were: Gina Mercer, Mike Reynolds and Jenny Stone on one side; and Ann Bunnell, Russ Fraser and Ros Thorpe on the other. An hilarious, but still informative, evening was had by all. It goes without saying that the team for the affirmative won the debate!!

A feature of the program each year was the courses offered. In an effort to cover as many areas of interest as possible, Betty and her advisers aimed for variety in the subject matter of the courses. Some met once a week for four weeks, while others ran longer than the life of the institute. Here are a few of the many courses made available:

1990 – Child sexual abuse: a reading course (an eight-week course led by Gina Mercer)

1991 – Women’s theatre and discussion (a three-week course led by Lisa Mitchell)

1992 – Tools for the revolution: a course in public speaking (an eight-week course led by Betty McLellan)



Winter Institute Dinner flyer

Feminist festival

In 1992, the institute program included a special Weekend Feminist Festival around the theme 'Celebrating women's knowledge'. On both days, the rather large venue was packed out – with a few women even opting to sit on the floor rather than miss out on the amazing experience. Speakers were:

Valerie Walkerdine, visiting Australia from the University of London, focused on 'Women and class'. As part of her presentation, she showed a film she herself had produced, called *Didn't she do well?*

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Indigenous Custodian of the land Minjerribah, poet, author, educator, spoke of her experiences as an Aboriginal woman, and shared some of her poetry.

Pam Gilbert, Senior Lecturer in Education at James Cook University in Townsville, feminist, educator, author, addressed the topic 'The stories not told: girls, narrative and social regulation'.

Dale Spender, researcher, writer, editor, broadcaster, teacher and leading feminist, addressed the topic 'Making IT work for women'.

The event, from beginning to end, proved to be a unique feast of feminist knowledge! All who attended partook of the feast – and wanted more.



The decision was made in 1997 to end the formal Winter Institute for Women program (after eight very exciting years) in order for Betty and her team to move on to other organising activities, but feminist analysis, knowledge and activism remained firmly at the centre of their endeavours – as can be seen here and in other chapters.

The 'World March of Women' Celebrations

In the late 1990s, an international initiative was being organised by women overseas, demanding the attention of male-dominated governments around the world. It was called 'The World March of Women 2000' and was described as a worldwide women's action "publicising the demands for concrete change to combat poverty and violence against women" (WomenAction 2000). Women's groups around the

world were urged to sign up and take responsibility for designing programs in their own part of the world.

A dinner: ‘Witch way? ... Preparing for the new millennium’ – February 1999

This dinner was planned as a precursor to the World March of Women and was the first millennium-related event to be organised by members of the Townsville Feminist Collective. Held at a local restaurant, Townsville women were invited to sign up. The restaurant had capacity for 30 diners and, by two weeks prior to the event, all 30 places had been taken up.

The dinner was advertised as an opportunity for women to get together with other women to discuss ideas leading up to the new millennium. The flyer stated: “Our hope for the future lies in the strength of our support for each other as we work to forge ahead in the fight for women’s human rights”.

It proved to be an evening of delicious food, stimulating company and passionate discussion.

The World March – Rome, Washington DC and New York 2000

Townsville Feminist Collective members were eager to be involved and, subsequently, organised a full program of events for the year, beginning with an International Women’s Day march and rally on 4 March 2000 with the theme: ‘Women unite against poverty and violence’.

Over the years, women from Townsville have attended a number of large international conferences, including the **4th World Conference on Women**, in Beijing (1995); and the ‘**Women’s Worlds**’ series of conferences in Adelaide (1996), Norway (1999), South Korea (2005), Spain (2008), and Canada (2011).

While the World March itself was designed as a program of activities in individual countries, there were also actual marches that took place in mid-October 2000 as a culmination of the year’s events. Two Townsville women made the decision to travel – first to Italy, and then to the United States – to represent Townsville feminists in those marches, while others organised activities at home.

In Rome, the Townsville representatives marched with thousands of women in the pouring rain which, they explained, in no way dampened the passion or the determination of all the women involved. Two days



Above: The World March of Women – Rome



Townsville representatives at the World March of Women – Washington

later, they were in Washington DC, and then went on to New York, marching in solidarity with all the women who had travelled there from different parts of the globe. It was estimated that around 50,000 women representing many, many countries marched that day – 20,000 in Washington DC and 30,000 in New York.

As one of the Townsville participants described her experience later: “[T]he air of determination and solidarity of purpose was totally exhilarating ... As we marched, there were women as far as the eye could see. Lots of chanting, lots of noise, drumming, whistles, etc. The most popular chant, and the one we repeated over and over, was ‘so-so-so – solidarity!’”

Weekend workshop – Taking ourselves seriously: feminist politics in the 21st century – August 2000

This weekend workshop was one of the events the women of Townsville organised as part of their program for the World March. It was a ‘turn-of-the-millennium’ workshop where women were invited to participate in the analysis of ‘the march of women through time’. As such, there was a deliberate focus on feminists from the past, present and future.

The song by American feminist folk singer, Carole Etzler, ‘Womanriver flowing on’, invited participants to focus attention on the fact that women in every generation are part of a huge woman-river that keeps on flowing through time.

One of the activities toward the end of the weekend involved participants, as feminists of the present, dividing into small groups and preparing their contributions to a ‘Time Capsule’ which was to include “motivating, challenging, inspiring and celebratory messages, slogans, music, book titles – and a statement for women of the future”. The final combined statement read:

*We are 27 feminists meeting together on beautiful
Magnetic Island for a weekend workshop focused
on the theme ‘Taking Women Seriously’. We have explored
the past and present of feminism and, in the flow of
the woman-river, would like to join with you –
the feminists of the future.*

*We, the women of our revolution, offer you, the women of
your time, the knowledge, the courage, the awareness and
the spirit we have created, and invite you to use it as a*

*foundation for your work. We wish you well as you continue
the challenge of making a world where
women can live with respect and equity – and love.*

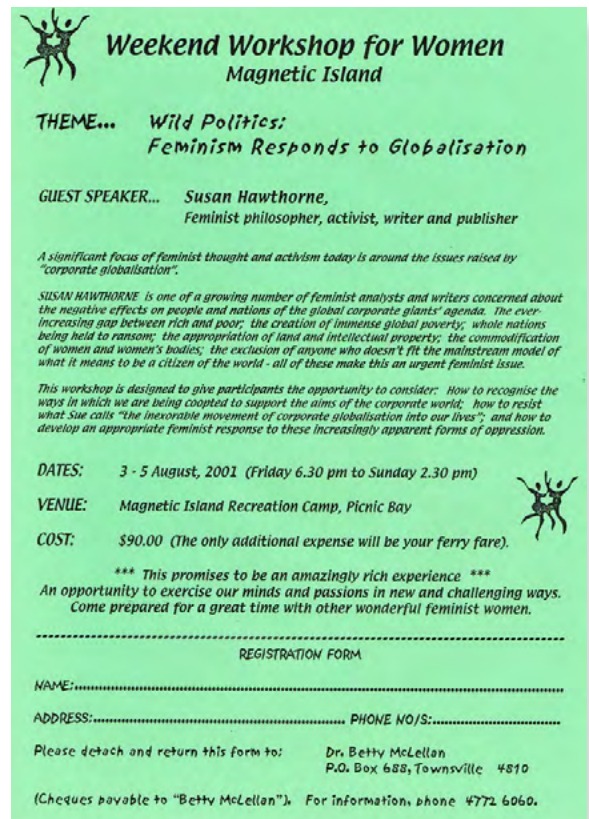
As they focused on the march of women through time, there was a real sense of being an integral part, not only of a worldwide movement, but also of a woman-river that just keeps on flowing.


The 'OtherWise' Series of Lectures, Workshops and Public Discussions

In 2001, four members of the Townsville Feminist Collective organised the Townsville International Women's Conference (see "Chapter 3"). Following that event, Joanne Baker, Coralie McLean, Betty McLellan and Chantal Oxenham created the Coalition for a Feminist Agenda website with the intention of continuing the work they had started. In addition to the Winter Institute for Women Intensive (2004) and the International Feminist Summit (2007) (see "Chapter 3"), they also organised a series of lectures, workshops and public discussions that they called 'OtherWise'.

Wild politics: feminism responds to globalisation – August 2001

(Led by Susan Hawthorne, feminist philosopher, activist, writer and publisher)



 **Weekend Workshop for Women**
Magnetic Island

THEME... Wild Politics:
Feminism Responds to Globalisation


GUEST SPEAKER... Susan Hawthorne,
Feminist philosopher, activist, writer and publisher

A significant focus of feminist thought and activism today is around the issues raised by "corporate globalisation".

SUSAN HAWTHORNE is one of a growing number of feminist analysts and writers concerned about the negative effects on people and nations of the global corporate giants' agenda. The ever-increasing gap between rich and poor; the creation of immense global poverty; whole nations being held to ransom; the appropriation of land and intellectual property; the commodification of women and women's bodies; the exclusion of anyone who doesn't fit the mainstream model of what it means to be a citizen of the world - all of these make this an urgent feminist issue.

This workshop is designed to give participants the opportunity to consider: How to recognise the ways in which we are being coopted to support the aims of the corporate world; how to resist what Sue calls "the inexorable movement of corporate globalisation into our lives"; and how to develop an appropriate feminist response to these increasingly apparent forms of oppression.

DATES: 3 - 5 August, 2001 (Friday 6.30 pm to Sunday 2.30 pm)

VENUE: Magnetic Island Recreation Camp, Picnic Bay 

COST: \$90.00 (The only additional expense will be your ferry fare).

*** This promises to be an amazingly rich experience ***
An opportunity to exercise our minds and passions in new and challenging ways.
Come prepared for a great time with other wonderful feminist women.

REGISTRATION FORM

NAME:.....

ADDRESS:..... PHONE NO/S:.....

Please detach and return this form to: Dr. Betty McLellan
P.O. Box 688, Townsville 4810

(Cheques payable to "Betty McLellan"). For information, phone 4772 6060.

Winter Institute Weekend Workshop flyer

This weekend workshop was an amazingly rich experience, where participants were invited to consider: “how to recognise the ways in which we are being co-opted to support the aims of the corporate world; how to resist [that which Susan called] ‘the inexorable movement of corporate globalisation into our lives’, and how to develop an appropriate feminist response to these increasingly apparent forms of oppression”.

Feedback from participants at the conclusion of the workshop was overwhelmingly positive, with women commenting on how refreshing it was to exercise their minds and be challenged by issues they had not previously thought about.

Women in Afghanistan – April 2004

This was a discussion with Mariam Rawi (an assumed name) representing The Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). Mariam Rawi was in Australia as part of an awareness-raising tour and was very eager to accept an invitation to travel to Townsville to share with participants the current situation for women in Afghanistan.

The event was advertised as “a unique opportunity for the women of Townsville to hear about the situation of women in Afghanistan” which, Mariam Rawi said, was still dire. At that time, it was two and a half years since the US-led coalition entered Afghanistan, but the women still struggled constantly against brutality and marginalisation. The evening was both enlightening and challenging – and much appreciated by all who attended.

Contemporary voices – July 2005

This workshop featured three young feminists exploring current issues relating to their research:

Joanne Baker – ‘Radical feminism for today’

Lara Fergus – ‘Women in exile’

Emma Woodley – ‘Women and power: ethical issues’.

All who attended this powerful weekend workshop were reminded that every generation of feminists fights the same kind of battles against patriarchal dominance, and that every generation of feminists engages with the issues with equal passion and determination.

Reclaiming their lives: refugee women and asylum- seekers fighting for their rights – March 2006

(Presented by Dr Eileen Pittaway,
Director of the Centre for Refugee
Research, University of New South
Wales, Sydney)

The Coalition for a Feminist
Agenda was pleased to partner
with the Townsville Multicultural
Support Group to make this visit
by Dr Pittaway possible. The public
lecture was a remarkable opportu-
nity for people living in the north of
the country and was much appreci-
ated by the more than 100 women
and men who attended.

DON'T MISS OUT!!!!

"Otherwise....."
An Occasional Lecture Series
presents a special event

PUBLIC LECTURE:

Reclaiming their Lives:
Refugee women and asylum seekers fighting for their rights
by **Dr Eileen Pittaway**
plus
video clips of refugee experience in camps in Burma and Kenya
stories from local refugee women

Eileen Pittaway is Director, Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales in Sydney. She has worked with the United Nations and her major area of research has been rape in conflict situations. In 2001 she received an award from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for her work with refugee women. She is currently working on a research project in Kenya and on the Thai Burma border focusing on "international protection" of refugee women against sexual and gender based violence.

Where? Perc Tucker Gallery (upstairs)
When? Wednesday 8 March, 5.30pm - 7.00pm
(International Women's Day)
Cost? Gold coin donation
All Welcome!

Organised by the Coalition for a Feminist Agenda
in conjunction with the Townsville Multicultural Support Group

For more information, visit our website: www.feministagenda.org.au, or contact bethmu@feministagenda.org.au

OtherWise series Public Lecture flyer

The human rights regime – the solution or part of the problem? – May 2008

(Presented by Dr Eileen Pittaway at James Cook University)

Again, the Coalition for a Feminist Agenda partnered with other groups (Townsville Multicultural Support Group, Amnesty International, JCU School of Social Work and Community Welfare, and the JCU Anton Breinl Centre for Public Health and Tropical Medicine) to make this event possible.

In her lecture, Dr Pittaway explored "the effectiveness of the United Nations in upholding human rights in a world which often seems determined to destroy them".

Developments, opportunities and challenges in Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program: a women-focused perspective – July 2009

(Presented by Tamara Domicelj, Refugee Council of Australia)

This special event was held at the Perc Tucker Gallery to celebrate the City Council’s declaration of Townsville as a ‘Refugee Welcome Zone’. Again, the Coalition partnered with others to bring about this important presentation. It was a wonderful celebration!

Hags, harpies, furies and crones: re-memembering Mary Daly Magnetic Island rage – September 2010

Mary Daly (1928–2010), one of Second Wave feminism’s most brilliant, most courageous, most radical and, in society’s terms, most controversial figures, died in Gardner, Massachusetts, on 3 January 2010.

The Coalition for a Feminist Agenda, supported by members of the Townsville Feminist Collective, invited women from around the country and, especially, across the local North Queensland region, to come together at this weekend workshop to celebrate Mary’s life, and the huge contribution she made to feminist thought and action.

Special Guest, and Speaker at the first evening session, was Mary Daly’s long-time Australian friend Suzanne Bellamy, radical feminist, artist and world-renowned potter. Her topic, ‘Mary Daly re-memembered’, was a gentle, funny, powerful reminder of one of radical feminism’s most influential foremothers.




REFLECTIONS ...
Karen Greig, regular Winter Institute for Women participant, recalls:

My life in Townsville became a journey of discovery and an experience that I believe was unique. To be part of a movement, totally dedicated to bringing like-minded women together to explore our history and to share other women's experiences through a safe place, was a wonderful experience.

Women's workshops were often held on Magnetic Island, where the likes of Dale Spender would be our guest for the weekend event. This was yet another opportunity to be in the presence of women who were our trailblazers.

I'll be forever grateful to the group of powerhouse feminist leaders and organisers who created and brought into being those opportunities for like-minded women, such as myself, to be involved in those progressive, exciting times.

It became obvious that these feminist powerhouses needed to be fully acknowledged, so, in 1994, I wrote and published a book entitled: *Herstory of Townsville* to showcase some of these women.

I now live in Melbourne and while I'm always on that journey of discovery, I have to say I've never since discovered so much, and had such a unique and enriching experience, as when I was living in Townsville. (*Vale Karen Greig 1958–2025*)

Spin-offs from Townsville's Feminist Activism

Following the very successful 2002 Townsville International Women's Conference (see "Chapter 3"), many participants were keen to continue the networking that had started there: to discuss feminist theory, inform each other of the progress toward women's rights happening in their own countries, and share ideas for effective activism.

So, the 'f-agenda' email discussion list was launched in the latter part of 2002 and ran for ten very interesting and spirited years. As with all discussion lists, some

members were very involved and contributed often while others preferred to stay in the background, calling themselves ‘lurkers’. Occasional surveys of members by the administrator of the list, however, revealed that members were generally satisfied with the roles they had chosen. Feedback about the level of discussion was generally positive.

The reason the decision was made, in 2012, to close the list, was that many members had already moved on to various feminist Facebook groups – and the time seemed right.



Another action taken following the 2002 Conference was the establishment of a more global-focused email list called ‘Peace Women Partners’. This was the brain-child of Merci Llarinas-Angeles, a powerful feminist activist from the Philippines, who had attended the Townsville International Women’s Conference. The list continues to operate more than 20 years after the conference, thanks to the commitment of Merci and her colleague, Cora Valdez Fabros, lawyer and Co-President of the International Peace Bureau.

Peace Women Partners has more than 100 members from many different countries around the world, and the discussion on the list continues to focus on the call for peace and non-violence, as well as the need to continue calling for the protection of women’s rights.



A more localised action following the conference was the establishment of the ‘Darlington Women’s Discussion Group’. It happened like this:

Jan Woodley was one of the passionate feminist women who worked hard to obtain government funding to get the Townsville Women’s Centre up and running in the 1980s. Also, she was an inaugural member of the Townsville Feminist Collective and involved in much of the early activism described in this book.

Following the International Conference in 2002, Jan and her partner made the decision to move back to their home state of Western Australia to live in Perth (in the suburb of Darlington). Feeling the absence of feminist input very keenly, Jan placed an advertisement in the local newspaper, inviting women to come together

to discuss the possibility of setting up a monthly discussion group focused on feminist ideas. She was overwhelmed by the response, and soon the Darlington Women's Discussion Group began – and continues to this day.



*Dancing at the
revolution ...*



CHAPTER 5

CREATIVITY, CULTURE AND PERFORMANCE

EVERY social movement is enriched by the music, poetry, art and theatre it creates, and the Women's Liberation Movement was no exception. In addition to organising conferences, offering opportunities for learning and spearheading serious protests and demonstrations, Townsville feminists invested a lot of time in developing and participating in one-of-a-kind cultural events: Gertrude's 'Salon' for Women, feminist concerts, theatre productions and the 'IWD Unmodified' breakfasts.

Gertrude's 'Salon' for Women

Early last century, European artists and writers met together to share ideas, support each other and inspire one another to greater heights of creativity. These gatherings were known as 'salons'. Gertrude's 'Salon' for Women was an experiment based on this idea. It aimed to provide a place where women in Townsville could get together to share women's knowledge and creativity.

Named after Gertrude Stein who was well known for her salons in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century, Gertrude's was a venture created by four local women – Betty McLellan, Bev Pehrson, Bettina Hennessy and Coralie McLean. It was inspired by those early salons, and by a similar concept operating in Melbourne in the early 1980s, called 'Salon a Muse'.

Held once a month, Gertrude's centred around the idea of a 'pop-up' coffee and cake venue, where women could meet and share knowledge in a way consistent with feminist principles. A guest speaker (or speakers) was invited to present her

research, writing, special skill or talent and then discuss with the audience. The presentations were women-centred and there was no hierarchy in the participant/guest speaker interaction. It was seen as a safe space and, as well as a stimulating, fun evening, provided a non-threatening way for women to explore topics from a feminist perspective.

In the first year, the Salon operated out of a venue on Flinders Street in the city, but it subsequently relocated to the Women's Centre at 50 Patrick Street, Aitkenvale. Responsibility for its operation was transferred to the Townsville Feminist Collective, with the regular monthly event being organised by Collective members on a roster system. The original four remained part of it. Gertrude's was held in the building undercroft on the first Friday of the month, starting at 8 pm. Tables and chairs were set up prior to each event, crockery hired, collected and returned each time, and supper prepared and laid out. The venue itself was not particularly salubrious but nonetheless an excitement and buzz were generated that always carried



The Women's Centre, at 50 Patrick Street, Aitkenvale, provided a venue for Gertrude's 'Salon' for Women

the gatherings and transcended the makeshift setting.

Entry was by donation (\$5 or \$2 concession), which included a delicious supper of freshly brewed coffee and homemade cakes. The Salon was promoted via regular community notices in local newspapers and radio, flyers posted at key locations and the always-effective word-of-mouth network.

Gertrude's began in 1987 and ran until 1998, concluding over a decade of operation with a large-scale and very successful theatre performance called *Women with attitude* (see later in this chapter). Over the years, many women attended these evenings – some on an occasional basis and others as committed regular participants. Attendance usually numbered between 20 and 30, although a few special occasions, such as the evening which featured well-known Australian singer and performance artist, Robyn Archer, attracted crowds closer to 100.

During the years it operated, a variety of topics were presented at Gertrude's. Some of these featured an area of interest or a woman's particular experience:

- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
| Sun, sand, but no surf: refugee women in the Kenyan desert | – Stephanie Gilbert |
| We and dromedaries: women participating in the Great Australian Camel Race | – Selina Hale and Julie Ford |
| Clowning: a new art form for women | – Caresse Cranwell |
| The male world of the mayoral election | – Shirley Gilliver |
| Women and gun control | – Cheryl Hercus |
| Women's approach to loss | – Barbara Erskine |
| You don't speak for me: radio talkback hosts and others ... | – Margaret Reynolds |

“Gertrude’s was always a special event on the feminist calendar each month. It was such a great way to make social contacts with like-minded women and there was always a buzz on the night. We sat at small tables (adorned with tablecloths, no less) and were served coffee and cake while listening to a guest speaker who shared with us something they had done, or were working on, or perhaps researching. Things that were relevant to women in some way or other. It was always a great night – lots of talk, lots of laughter. I loved it.” *Glenice*

Other topics focused on feminist theory or were the subject of academic research:

- Stoning the romance: teenage romance fiction – Pam Gilbert
 Women and ageing – Jane Thomson
 The construction of women through religious and medical discourse, witchcraft and midwifery – Carrie Parratt
 Contemporary women in anthropology – Elizabeth Hatte
 Ethical rationalism: a challenge for contemporary feminism – Betty McLellan

Those topics that explored music, literature and the arts were always popular:

- An evening with Robyn Archer – Robyn Archer
 Women of the north – Townsville Little Theatre – June Aylward
 Images of the Goddess – Anneke Silver
 Tiwi Aboriginal art – Lyn Helms
 Landscape as metaphor – Sylvia Ditchburn
 Songs from the feminist and peace movements – Mandi Pieters
 Sisters in crime: a delightful dip into women's detective novels – Coralie McLean

Open 8 pm.

Gertrude's
a 'Salon' for Women

FEATURING

A PRESENTATION
OF WOMEN'S POETRY

ON FRIDAY, MAY 8 th.

GERTRUDE'S is an experiment based on the idea of the early European 'salons'. It aims to provide a place where women in Townsville can get together to share women's knowledge and women's creativity.
 Every 2nd. and 4th. FRIDAY of each month, Gertrude's will invite a woman to share her work/talent/interest with other women. The evening will be both informative and entertaining.

Cost: \$5 includes supper

829 Flinders Street
(Crystal Rainbow Centre)

PHONE BEV ON 757555 FOR FURTHER INFO

Left and next page:
 A selection of flyers
 for Gertrude's 'Salon'
 for Women

Also popular were those evenings that shared stories of women's lives and women's history:

- Making sense of the world – *Susie Dickson*
- A decade of feminism in Townsville – *Townsville Feminist Collective*
- Gilding the lily: a humorous look at the history of the adornment of women – *Joycelyn Brent*



Over the ten or so years of the life of Gertrude's, many women commented on the camaraderie, the energy and the joy they found there. There was also often surprise expressed that this example of contemporary feminist culture was to be found in a North Queensland regional centre, while such opportunities seemed to be lacking in some of the nation's larger cities. Perhaps this was Townsville showing the way yet again?

The Small Collective – Bringing Women's Music to Townsville

Music has been a significant component of the feminist culture which emerged as part of the Women's Liberation Movement. At its height this culture was dynamic, passionate and energising and it served to highlight political issues while also fostering a strong sense of sisterhood.

The Townsville Small Collective, a feminist group dedicated to bringing women's music to Townsville, was formed in 1991. That year, the group organised 'Judy Small in Concert' (the Collective's chosen name is an obvious derivative) thinking this would be a one-off venture. However, the concert was so successful it inspired the Collective to 'stay in business' and pursue opportunities to feature other outstanding performers.

Over the next few years, the Collective arranged appearances by Peggy Seeger (February 1992), Frankie Armstrong (February 1993), Heather Bishop (March 1995), and Jess Hawk Oakenstar (on two occasions – January 1993 and March



Flyer for Peggy Seeger and Irene Scott in concert, January 1992

1995), with Judy Small also making return visits in July 1993 and June 1995.

All performances found enthusiastic and appreciative audiences in Townsville and the whole venture was hugely successful.¹¹

Judy Small is an Australian folk singer well known for her very popular feminist and political songs. Her twelve albums include: *A natural selection* (1982) with 'To be a woman' and 'Festival of light'; *Ladies and gems* (1984) featuring 'They promise you diamonds'; and *Homefront* (1998) with 'You don't speak for me'.

Judy won several awards during her career and in 2013 received a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her contribution to folk music.

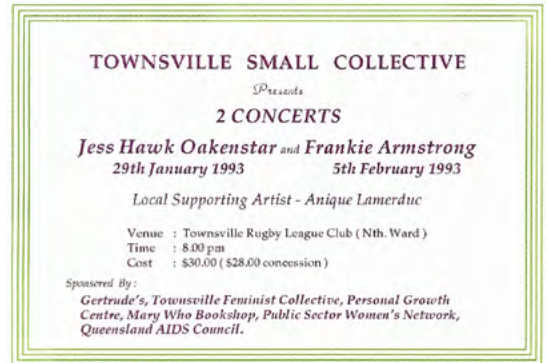
Peggy Seeger is a singer-songwriter who was born in the USA but lived most of her life in Britain. She produced many albums, including *Different therefore equal* (1979) featuring the iconic tracks 'Reclaim the night' and 'I'm gonna be an engineer'.

She is a prolific songwriter and included in her repertoire is 'Carry

11 Source: The information in this section is based on personal knowledge, album covers, and promotional material received from the artists and from Queensland Community Arts Network Inc, at the time; plus Wikipedia contributors (29 May 2025) 'Judy Small'; Heather Bishop (2017); and Blue Mountains Gazette (2023).



Ticket for Judy Small in concert, July 1993



Ticket for Jess Hawke Oakenstar and Frankie Armstrong concerts, January/February 1993



Ticket for Frankie Armstrong in concert, February 1993

Greenham home’ – an anthem for the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp.

Frankie Armstrong, from Britain, is an internationally renowned folk singer and voice teacher. She has been part of the women’s and the peace movements since the 1960s. While in Townsville she conducted a day-long women’s voice workshop.

“Music was such an important part of feminist culture, and I always loved the political messages conveyed in the songs as well as the way music could foster the sisterhood.

As Judy Small sang:
‘While there’s music in the movement, the movement’s going strong’ (Small 1995).

So, it was such a delight to be part of the group involved in bringing women’s music to Townsville. It was a coup to attract such big names to our regional city and Townsvillians flocked to the performances.

One of our friends who had relocated here from Sydney was most impressed that we could attract performers of such calibre. She confided that, prior to her move to North Queensland, her Sydney friends had warned her that she would likely find a cultural desert in this part of the state, so she was bowled over to find such a vibrant and exciting scene.”

Coralie

I heard a woman singing (1984) and *Lovely on the water* (1972) are among her most popular albums.

Heather Bishop is a Canadian singer–songwriter in the folk tradition. She is also known for her work as a social justice advocate and has received a number of awards, including the Order of Canada (CM).

Her albums include *Old new borrowed blue* (1992) featuring tracks such as ‘If you love freedom’ and ‘Did Jesus have a baby sister’, and *Daydream me home* (1994) with the iconic song ‘Warrior’.

Jess Hawk Oakenstar was a singer–songwriter born and raised in Zimbabwe, later living in New Zealand and the USA. Her style was eclectic with a focus on social issues. Jess passed away in 2022.

Her first album, *Leave a little light behind* (1992), was followed by *Your heart will show you* (1994), in which she makes reference to tropical Townsville in the title track, written after her first visit here.

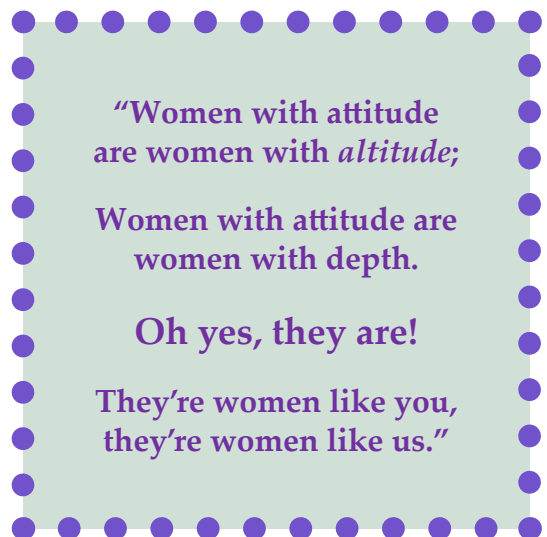
the woman who was performing the solo part in one of the sketches, unexpectedly withdrew. Reluctant to drop a key element of the production, but unable to find a willing replacement at such short notice, Betty contacted her friend, Bronwyn Patton, who lived in Mackay, and Bronwyn generously agreed to travel to Townsville for the weekend and ‘give it a go’. At the final rehearsal, she joined the troupe and slipped effortlessly into the role.

Another potential crisis arose when the circus group got to the dress rehearsal at the venue. The months of practice had honed their tumbling skills but all that practice had been done outside on grass. On the hard wooden floor of the Arts building, they found that those rolls and flips were not going to fly! Not daunted, the women came up with a work-around that consisted of carrying in and laying out rolls of carpet offcuts as if this were part of the routine. A rough but effective solution, and a quick save!

An even more worrying situation came up just a week or so before the performance. It had been planned that the show would open with the cast singing ‘Women with attitude’ – a song especially written for the production. The group was having some trouble pulling it together so, with just days to go, two well-known local playwrights were asked to attend the rehearsal and provide some feedback. Their reaction confirmed that, rather than the exhilarating opening number everyone had been hoping for, this was on track to be an embarrassing disaster. Again, with the creativity and flexibility of committed women, a ‘fix’ was devised: the song became a rap! This was so much easier and quite on-trend. It also allowed for some enthusiastic drumming to be added and, in the end, it became a celebratory and energising opening number.

Finally, the show was ready to go on. The performance began with the entire cast entering the theatre accompanied by dramatic drumming and clapping and launching into their special rap – ‘Women with attitude’.

A variety of skits formed the framework of the performance. Some were stand-alone and others were performed in parts staggered throughout the evening.



They focused on themes, such as the role of women in the home, recognising domestic violence situations, and decisions to return to further education. These vignettes were interspersed with: dance – an older women’s tap-dancing troupe, and a school ballet group; song – including singing duo Mirror Image, twin sisters showcasing their Indigenous culture; and a group self-titled ‘The Women’s Sewing Circle and Terrorist Society’ sharing poetry and song.

All acts were well received by a very supportive audience at both performances, but two were particularly popular:

- the circus troupe ‘Circus Oz Fem’ – a newly-assembled, but much practised, group of (mostly older) women performing rolls, cartwheels, juggling and lifts; and
- ‘The Vice Girls’ – local politicians Senator Margaret Reynolds, Deputy Mayor Ann Bunnell and State Member Lindy Nelson-Carr with a reworked version of the classic song ‘I’m gonna wash that man right outta my hair’.

The whole performance was anchored by two commentators, whose energetic interactions and witty dialogue engaged the audience and provided some context and a connection between items.

Audience response to the performance was loud and enthusiastic and subsequent feedback was highly gratifying. There were even rave reviews in the ‘Letters to the Editor’ page of the local newspaper. The whole endeavour was positive and affirming and exceeded all expectations.

“Women with attitude
are serious thinkers;

Women with attitude
know how to have fun.

Oh yes, they do!

They’re women like you,
they’re women like us.”

“Women with attitude,

Women with attitude,

Women with attitude,

THAT’S US!”

A week or so after the big event, Betty received a lovely card from two members of the audience, unknown to any of the group, which read:

“To all the women who participated in ‘Women with attitude’,
 Congratulations on such an empowering performance!!
 It was very enjoyable and uplifting to see a performance that
 tackled so many issues affecting women each day.
 Thank you!! ...”

Performance – Women Acting Up: 100 Years of Women’s Activism

International Women’s Day was first held in 1911 and the Townsville Feminist Collective decided that the 100th anniversary of this important day should be marked with a special event. An idea of a dramatic presentation, that would chart women’s struggles and achievements over the preceding ten decades, was adopted with interest and enthusiasm (and perhaps a little naivety) by Collective members, and the production *Women acting up: 100 years of women’s activism* was created.

Preparing for the presentation was a six-month project. The monthly Feminist Collective meetings were dedicated to research and discussion of the key events marking each of the decades from 1910 onwards, as well as planning, crafting and practising for the performance itself.

As a result of this intensive research and preparation, the following summary of the decades was compiled, and distributed at the performance:

1910–1920

In this decade, women across the world mobilised around the vote, and around property rights, working conditions, and their political and economic entitlements.

1920s

Following World War 1, there was a renewed vibrancy in many countries and, as part of this, women were exploring their creativity. Writers like Virginia Woolf represented women’s views in a new way – recognising that the world of men was not necessarily women’s world.

1930s

After the exuberance of the 20s, the 30s was a more serious, sombre time. Women's progress was checked by the harsh realities of economic depression. The focus shifted to employment and survival, and many women threw their energies into the movement for workers' rights.

1940s

In this decade, women dealt with yet another World War during which they were called on to participate in roles that had been previously denied to them. Then, in the aftermath of war, they were expected to retreat compliantly into their homes. Many women were not prepared to relinquish their new-found autonomy so easily.

1950s

Generally regarded as a period of retreat from struggle, women were less visible in the public arena during this decade. However, new ideas were fermenting. Among the intelligentsia, there were some who were beginning again to analyse and write about the social conditioning of women.

1960s

The decade of the 60s saw the burgeoning of a number of social justice movements – black liberation, gay liberation, women's liberation. Commonly

WOMEN ACTING UP

-100 Years of Women's Activism

*Court House Theatre, Sturt St, City
Friday 9 September 2011, 7.00pm
(Bar open from 6.00pm)*

Cost: \$20/conc: \$10
Proceeds to Townsville women's services

Tickets available at the door

This presentation by Townsville Women charts a century of women's struggles and achievements, from 1910 to the present.

In a series of vignettes, we highlight some of the defining moments of the women's movement over the past ten decades.

**All welcome
Come and join us!**

For more information contact Betty McLellan
Ph 47XXXXXX; email xxxxxxxx

Flyer for 'Women Acting Up', September 2011

regarded as the beginning of Second Wave feminism in the Western world, this period was characterised by tremendous energy and activism – evidenced by consciousness raising groups, demonstrations and marches and a mass mobilisation of women.

1970s

By the 1970s, the Women’s Liberation Movement was in full swing. Women’s traditional roles were challenged, male violence against women was named, sisterhood was valued and politicised and a vibrant women’s culture flourished.

1980s

This decade saw the consolidation of the movement as governments responded to the need for women’s services. Women’s studies programs were enconced in academia and serious issues, like prostitution and pornography, were courageously tackled by feminist activists and scholars. At the same time, feminism was being challenged to confront the issues of class and race that operated within the women’s movement itself.

1990s

The 90s was a decade of mixed fortunes as the backlash against feminism gained momentum, but the struggle persisted. Aided by evolving internet technologies, the movement expanded to include an international focus and an increasing awareness of human rights issues as they impacted on women across the world.

2000–2010

Major shifts in world political and economic power bases over this decade resulted in little, if any, real advancement for women, and some hard-won gains were lost as services for women were progressively defunded. However, women maintained the struggle. A key issue of concern identified by feminists was the increasing sexualisation and objectification of women and girls.

In the lead-up to the performance, promotional material was developed and distributed. It read:

This presentation by Townsville women charts a century of women’s struggles and achievements, from 1910 to the present.

In a series of vignettes, it highlights some of the defining moments of the women’s movement over the past ten decades.

Produced by the Townsville Feminist Collective, this event celebrates 100 years of International Women’s Day by outlining

women's stories through the century. Told through readings, reminiscences, music and pictures, these scenarios are stirring, funny, inspiring and serious by turns.

From the marches and demonstrations of the 1910s to famous and influential figures, such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir and Jessie Street, to the mass movement of the 60s, 70s and 80s, women's causes, concerns and creative energies are showcased in a lively and engaging way.

In the intimate setting of the Old Courthouse Theatre, women's stories come alive and remind us that, while so much has been achieved for women, much remains to be done.

The production team had maintained energy and commitment from the very beginning; however, when rehearsals moved to the Old Courthouse Theatre and opening night was just days away, nerves began to fray. So much to do and so little time left. Family and friends, and friends of friends, were called on to lend a hand with stage set-up, electricals, visuals, and music. Last-minute script changes were added and, at the final dress rehearsal, things were chaotic, performances were shaky and confidence was battered. The whole idea of performing in public the very next night began to feel like madness.

The 'big night' arrived and tensions remained high. There was a collective holding of breath as the curtain went up. On came the first act and the stage filled with suffragettes marching and singing and performing like professionals. They did it! The audience clapped and cheered, and from that moment, it was clear that it would all come together just as planned – and everyone could breathe again.

The program for the night was as follows:

Decades	Created and presented by
<p>1910s</p> <p>Across the world, women take to the streets for their rights, for their vote</p>	<p><i>Heather Bond, Ginni Hall, Madge Sceriha, Mercia Philipson, Diane Turner, Pauline Moore, Lucy Ward, Leone Batt, Gabrielle Whackley, Sonya Mitchell, Annie Lewis</i></p>

1920s

In a play within a play, Virginia Woolf and friends speculate on the causes of women's oppression

Adrienne Isnard, Mandy Farimbella, Jane Saint, Cathy Crawford, Paula Gaffney

1930s

Two long distance friends reminisce about their activism during the 30s

Betty McLellan, Nonie Harris, Sue Cole, Heather Bond, Deb Pennington, Cheryl Vacchini

1940s

Jessie Street – a heroine – expresses her views and commitment to advancing the cause of women

Madge Sceriha

1950s

French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, tells it like it is for women

Chantal Oxenham, Elodie Oxenham, Ryl Harrison

1960s

A mass movement is born and women take to the streets once more

Maree Hawken, Pauline Woodbridge

INTERVAL

1970s

Two friends compile for their daughters a collage of their life experiences in the 70s

Sheree Kinlyside, Judith Threlfall

1980s

At a Feminist Collective meeting, members share the wise and challenging words of feminist thinkers Robin Morgan, Dale Spender and Audre Lorde

Coralie McLean, Di Plumb, Deb Miles

1990s

In an ever-more globalised world, international women's issues come to the fore

Suzy Dormer, Meg Davis, Naomi David

2000s

The ongoing sexualisation of women and girls means the struggle for equality must continue so that our daughters can have a fairer future

Ryl Harrison, Elodie Oxenham, Artiqua Harrison, Kayleen Crisafulli, Ainslie Langdon

As the performance triumphantly concluded and all the performers assembled on stage, the audience was left with these words:

... the future

The last 100 years have encompassed many iterations of women's activism as feminism evolved and moved in response to changing political and social circumstances. Much has been learnt, much achieved and much remains to be done. And for the struggle that still confronts us, women stand ready, stand strong and stand united on the solid base laid by our activist foremothers.

Street Theatre – *Can Do*

After winning the 2001 Queensland state election in a landslide, Premier Peter Beattie wanted to restructure the economy and, as part of that plan, was keen to attract aviation industries, including Virgin Airlines, to Queensland. Time, effort and money were being invested in this initiative while, at the same time, decisions about providing ongoing funding for the Townsville/Thuringowa Women's Community Health Centre were stalled.

The following piece of satirical 'street-theatre' presents a fictional scenario designed to draw attention to the challenges women's services have faced in securing adequate funding. This light-hearted comedy was written and directed by Betty McLellan and presented at the Townsville Women's Health Summit (15–16 June 2001) (*see* "Chapter 3"). The majority of the characters were played by local amateur volunteers, except for the roles of **Pauline Woodbridge, Jan Woodley**

and **Lis Cameron**, Townsville women involved in local women’s services and groups, who played themselves. Both state and federal Members of Parliament were present. The piece was performed with great enthusiasm and was wildly applauded by the audience.



CAN DO

(Carnival atmosphere. Music playing. Streamers. Someone juggling. ‘Premier Peter Beattie’ walks confidently on to the stage, smiling and waving as people cheer. He wears a big circular tag with ‘P.B.’ on it).

Peter Beattie: Roll up, roll up, ladies and gentlemen. Gather round to hear about my amazing ‘CAN DO’ government.

I’m the Great Pooh-Bah. I’m the CAN DO Premier. And I want to introduce you to my CAN DO government.

(He introduces them) First, my CAN DO Minister for Emergency Services and Minister representing me in the North, Member for Townsville, Mike Reynolds. *(Mike runs on to the stage as audience cheers. He waves. Bows. Stands at the back of the stage).*

Next, my CAN DO Parliamentary Secretary for Health, the very talented, very popular Member for Mundingburra, Lindy Nelson-Carr. *(Lindy runs on to the stage ... repeat as for Mike).*

And finally, my brand-spanking-new, very intelligent, hand-picked by myself, CAN DO Member for Thuringowa, Anita Phillips. *(Anita runs on to the stage ... repeat as for Mike and Lindy).*

Put your hands together, ladies and gentlemen, for a brilliant and, dare I say, very attractive trio – dedicated to representing you in Queensland’s CAN DO government.

Chorus line: *(Members of the chorus line begin chanting “Can do, Can do ...” from various points in the audience and move forward to perform the ‘Can Do’ chorus).*

Peter Beattie: Roll up, ladies and gentlemen. Don't be shy. All you have to do is tell us what we can do for you. Anything you want. Our answer will always be: *(all four politicians chant together)* "CAN DO. CAN DO. WE'RE THE 'CAN DO' KIDS". *(repeat)*

Richard Branson: *(flies in – in a red Virgin plane)* Mr Premier, I'm considering setting up my airline headquarters in Brisbane. Other states want it, but if you'll just give me an incentive of around three-quarters of a million dollars, I'm yours! Look how much employment we'll create. And, more important, look how great you'll appear in the eyes of the voters.

Peter Beattie: *(considers for a moment)* CAN DO!

Politicians' Chorus: CAN DO. CAN DO.
WE'RE THE 'CAN DO' KIDS. *(repeat)*

Tony Mooney: Mr Premier.

Peter Beattie: Yes, Mr Mayor.

Tony Mooney: As you know, Mr Premier, we have a very popular beach at the Strand, but it's being washed out to sea. We need more sand. As a matter of fact, we need 1.6 million dollars worth of sand to build up our beach.

Peter Beattie: *(considers it...)* CAN DO!

Politicians' Chorus: CAN DO. CAN DO.
WE'RE THE 'CAN DO' KIDS. *(repeat)*

Pauline Woodbridge: Mr Premier. We urgently need a Women's Health Centre in this area. It's been ten months since your government defunded the Townsville/Thuringowa Women's Community Health Centre. You keep telling us you're committed to women's health and to re-funding our Centre. The question is: When? We need it now.

Chorus line: *(whispering)* Now...now...now...now...

(Peter Beattie shrinks into the background).

Mike Reynolds: I must say I was very disappointed when I heard that the Women's Health Centre had closed down. Let me assure you that you have my unequivocal support in your efforts to reopen the Centre. I will do whatever it takes.

Public Servant: I'm the public servant responsible for making recommendations to the government for the funding of non-government services. The government giveth and the government taketh away – ON MY RECOMMENDATION. If you want Women's Health funding, Pauline, you have to prove to me that you're worthy of this great honour that the government will bestow upon you. First, your management committee is to work on a plan to restructure the service, and present it to me for approval.

Chorus line: (*sing to the tune 'Can't get away to marry you today'*)

Here's a little hoop
 Just a tiny hoop
 Let's see you ... jumping through the hoop
 We'll then get back to you.

(*While chorus line sings, someone jumps through a hoop held above a tumbling mat. Jumps through hoop and does a tumble – as in a circus*).

Tony Mooney: Another thing, Mr Premier. We thought it might be a good idea to spend some money on securing Castle Hill, to try to prevent huge rocks tumbling down on top of the houses on the side of the hill. In order to do that, we'll need half a million dollars from state government coffers.

Peter Beattie: (*considers...*) CAN DO!

Politicians' chorus: CAN DO. CAN DO.
 WE'RE THE 'CAN DO' KIDS. (*repeat*)

Lis Cameron: Mr Premier. We need the funding for our Women's Health Centre. We've presented our plan for a restructure and it's been given a big tick by almost all Queensland Health personnel. We need funding now.

Chorus line: (*whispering*) Now...now...now...now...

(*Peter Beattie shrinks into the background*).

Anita Phillips: (*steps forward*) I support you all the way. Women of all ages need women to talk to about their health issues. I want to see the Women's Health Centre reopened immediately.

Public Servant: Yes, we received your plans for a restructure. But, before we can consider funding, Lis, we want a detailed Service Agreement from you. Present us with details of how you plan to implement the Service, and then we'll see.

Chorus line: (*sing to the tune 'Can't get away to marry you today'*)

Here's a little hoop
 Just a tiny hoop
 Let's see you ... jumping through the hoop
 We'll then get back to you.

(*While chorus line sings, someone jumps through a hoop held above a tumbling mat. Jumps through hoop and does a tumble – as in a circus.*)

Tony Mooney: And then there's the Douglas Arterial Road, Mr Premier. Very important to our region. As you know, the federal government refuses to come to the party. We desperately need the state to contribute 5.6 million dollars.

Peter Beattie: (*considers...*) CAN DO!

Politicians' chorus: CAN DO. CAN DO.

WE'RE THE 'CAN DO' KIDS. (*repeat*)

Jan Woodley: So when will our Health Centre be re-funded, Mr. Premier? We need it now.

Chorus line: (*whispering*) Now...now...now...now...

(*Peter Beattie shrinks into the background.*)

Lindy Nelson-Carr: Look women – I want you to know that I'll do all I can to make sure the Women's Health Centre gets re-funded. It's such an important service. I promise you Jan, you *will* get your funding.

Public Servant: How do we know for sure, Jan, that the women of Townsville and Thuringowa actually need a Health Centre? How do we know if they even want a Health Centre? Yes, we've received your plan for a restructure and the details about how you plan to implement the service. But, before we can consider funding, you must undertake extensive community consultations. You are to conduct a 'Needs Analysis' to discover once and for all what the women of your area really want.

Chorus line: (*sing to the tune 'Can't get away to marry you today'*)

Here's a little hoop
 Just a tiny hoop
 Let's see you ... jumping through the hoop
 We'll then get back to you.

(While chorus line sings, someone jumps through a hoop held above a tumbling mat. Jumps through hoop and does a tumble – as in a circus).

Sportsperson: Mr Premier, you know how important sporting activities are for young people – for all of us, really. We need one million dollars for an upgrade of the Murray Sporting complex.

Peter Beattie: *(considers...)* CAN DO!

Politicians' chorus: CAN DO. CAN DO.
WE'RE THE 'CAN DO' KIDS. *(repeat)*

Pauline Woodbridge: Mr Premier, the Needs Analysis showed very clearly that there's an urgent need for a Women's Health Centre in this area and that there's overwhelming support in the community. Your public servants have had the report from the Needs Analysis since late February and still we've heard nothing. When are we going to get our funding? We need it now.

Chorus line: *(whispering)* Now...now...now...now...

(Peter Beattie shrinks into the background).

Public Servant: I haven't had a chance to look at it yet, Pauline. When I find the time, I'll read it. Then I'll have it scrutinised by some of the research experts in our department. When that's all been done, I'll get back to you.

Chorus line: When...when...when...when...

Lindy Nelson-Carr: Enough!! A Women's Health Centre is needed NOW. I think these good women have jumped through enough hoops to last them a lifetime. I'll see to it that these delaying tactics stop and that the women of Townsville have their Health Centre now!

Chorus line: *(loudly)* Now...now...now...now...

PAUSE

Public Servant: *(sheepishly)* I'm happy to announce that the Townsville/Thuringowa Women's Community Health Centre will be re-funded as of 1 July 2001. *(loud cheers from the audience)*

Chorus line: Lindy...Lindy...Lindy...Lindy

Peter Beattie: Yes, ladies and gentlemen. I'm your CAN DO Premier ...

Lindy Nelson-Carr: (*moves in and touches P.B. on the shoulder*) And I'm your CAN DO Parliamentary Secretary for Health. Ask what you will, and we'll always reply:

Politicians' chorus: CAN DO. CAN DO.
WE'RE THE 'CAN DO' KIDS. (*repeat*)

(*Chorus line joins in. Invites the audience to join in too. Repeat several times ... CAN DO. CAN DO. WE'RE THE 'CAN DO' KIDS.*)

(*Streamers, dancing, chanting ... to conclude with a carnival atmosphere.*)

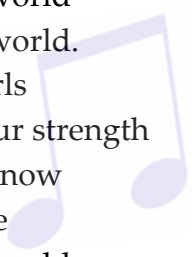
Creative Moments – A Snapshot

Many occasions provided women with the chance to express their creativity and celebrate their feminism. Social gatherings, parties and dinners were often accompanied by specially written songs, poems or speeches. The following is a small sample.

A reworked Christmas carol:

Silent Night – Which Isn't Anymore!

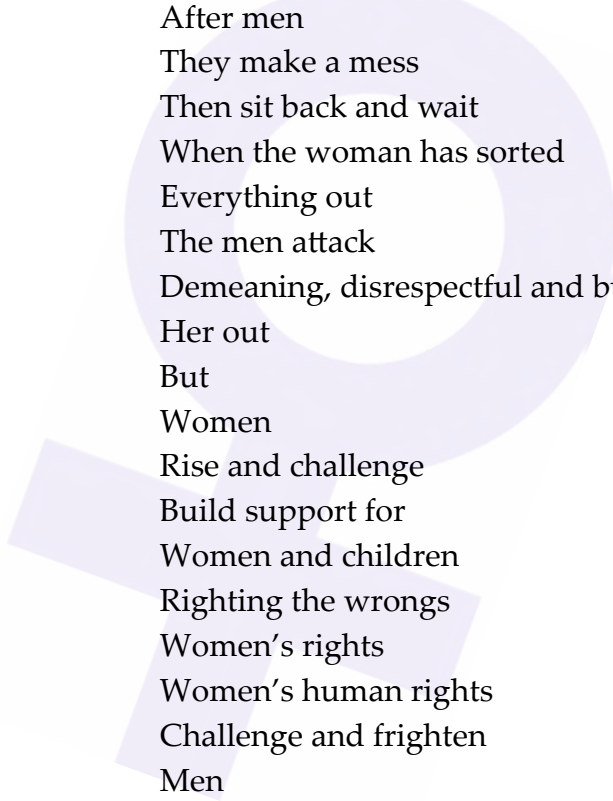
Noisy nights, feisty nights,
All is loud with our song
Townsville women all laugh and cheer
Revolutions are joyous things
We are changing our world
We are changing our world.
Happy nights, cheerful nights
All is safe at our dance
How we love to think and talk
Warmth and laughter is how we work



We are changing our world
 We are changing our world.
 Rowdy girls, angry girls
 We subvert through our strength
 Celebrate us here and now
 We are truly incredible
 We are changing our world
 We are changing our world.

An impromptu poem:

Women



Are always cleaning up
 After men
 They make a mess
 Then sit back and wait
 When the woman has sorted
 Everything out
 The men attack
 Demeaning, disrespectful and bully
 Her out
 But
 Women
 Rise and challenge
 Build support for
 Women and children
 Righting the wrongs
 Women's rights
 Women's human rights
 Challenge and frighten
 Men
 Our ideas are dangerous!

A satirical rap:

Dangerous

Chorus (repeat once):

Feminists are dangerous, we're dangerous
(Audience) Oh YES we ARE!

Back in the past, the boys were in charge
 Livin it up, they were livin it large
 Those patriarchs just cramped our style
 Then they saw US comin, and they RAN a mile! Because ...

Chorus

Women Are Human, you better believe it!
 Those patriarchs just couldn't conceive it
 So we Stepped Up Front. Grabbed the Mic.
 MARCHED in the streets and CLAIMED OUR RIGHTS!!

Chorus

Now they're goin to space, gonna colonise!
 But the planets are far, it'll take a few tries
 Yeah they're headin to space, but let's remember ...
 If Men are from Mars – just RETURN to SENDER!!

Chorus

Now the world keeps changin, but we're STILL here
 We keep on goin, year after year
 There's War Pollution Nuclear threat
 But we KEEP gettin STRONGER and we're NOT DEAD YET!!!¹²

(whispering) And Guess What ...?

(whispering) Chorus

Chorus



12 See Klein and Hawthorne (2021) *Not dead yet: feminism, passion and women's liberation*

IWD ‘Unmodified’ – An Alternate International Women’s Day Breakfast

The IWD Unmodified Breakfasts were conceived as an alternative to the large corporate breakfasts that had become the standard fare for International Women’s Day. The aim was to create an event more in-line with the original purpose of IWD, highlighting the need for ongoing struggle.

The ‘alternate’ breakfasts started in 2012 and were held on, or close to, International Women’s Day (8 March) each year until 2018. From a small gathering at the inaugural breakfast, numbers quickly rose as word spread. Over seven years, the IWD Unmodified Breakfasts became something of an event on the local feminist calendar, with around 25 women usually attending to share a common commitment to the original spirit of IWD, hear an inspiring guest speaker, enjoy breakfast together and have some feminist fun.

The concept behind these alternate breakfasts is outlined in these opening remarks by Coralie McLean, one of the organisers, at the 6th IWD Unmodified Breakfast in 2017:

Good morning, Women!

Let me remind you of why we get together in this way.

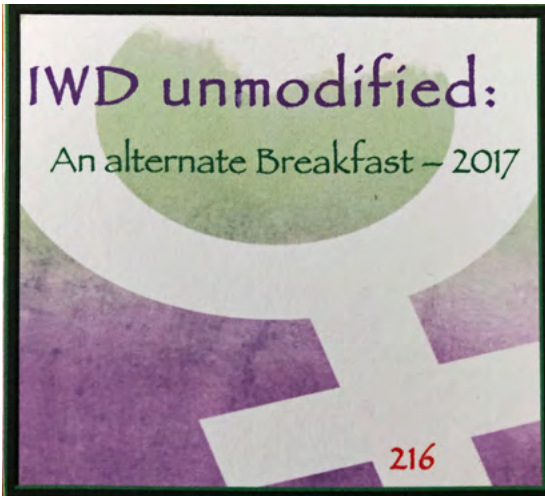
IWD has traditionally been a political event – a time to celebrate women’s achievements yes, but always to focus on the ongoing struggle.

More recently, we’ve seen a shift away from the political – a mainstreaming and consequent watering down, a ‘de-fanging’ of the day – and we wanted to counter that in some small way. Hence our claim of an ‘unmodified’ event and our deliberate move away from a more corporate style of event such as we’ve seen in recent years.

“Now, I don’t want to knock all the other IWD events. We’ve even taken a few things from their format.

They have guest speakers – and some of them are very good – and we have even better guest speakers, as you’ll see.

They have their corporate sponsors and we have our sponsors too. They may not be the big banks or high-profile businesses, but they are pretty



*IWD 'Unmodified' Breakfast,
lucky door ticket, March 2017*

“While there are now lots of events happening across the city for **International Women’s Day**, this is the one that most calls to mind the original intent and purpose of the day.

At the IWD ‘Unmodified’ Breakfasts we can enjoy ourselves and celebrate our achievements but there is also something here that is reminiscent of that **early grassroots struggle for women’s equality and liberation**.

That is what resonates with so many women – especially those of us who have marked the day over many years.” *Anita*

impressive. We have the ‘Townsville Women’s Sewing Circle and Terrorist Group’, the ‘Nasty Women’s Collective’ and the Northern Chapter of ‘Destroy the Joint’. These are our sponsors ... or I’m sure they would be if they existed.

And, of course, just like those other events, we have our lucky door prizes. Now, they won’t be limousine rides, or weekends for two on Hayman Island, and they may actually be more virtual than real, but I’m sure you’ll find they are very desirable nonetheless.

Actually, I think we’ve managed to combine celebration, acknowledgement, fun and resistance pretty well at our alternate breakfasts.

As usual, the format for our IWD Breakfast will include:

- IWD greetings and messages from women across the world;
- our ‘tongue-in-cheek’ lucky door prizes; and
- a special guest speaker who will focus our minds on current feminist issues.

So now, enjoy your breakfast.

Special guests gave presentations on a variety of topics. Some of these included:

- Attending the United Nations discussions on domestic violence (in New York) – *Pauline Woodbridge*
- The #MeToo movement – does it herald a new feminist era? – *Betty McLellan*
- Collective Shout – organising against the objectification of women – *Angela Burrows*

These and other important presentations were well received and much appreciated, although the highlight of the event was always the lucky door prizes.

Over the years the fortunate winners have received prizes such as:

Beauty pack: consisting of six bottles of underarm hair-restorer

An anti-misogyny pin: to use on an effigy of your chosen misogynist

An all-expenses-paid tour of past IWD March routes in Townsville: ... being doubled on Betty's bicycle

An invitation to afternoon tea with the Minister for Women, Tony Abbott.



*It will be a great day
when women's services get
all the money they need*

*and the air force has to hold a
cake stall to buy a fighter jet ...*



CHAPTER 6

**WOMEN'S SERVICES –
FOR WOMEN, BY WOMEN**

IN the latter decades of the 20th century, when the Women's Liberation Movement was taking off around the Western world – evidenced by mass protests against patriarchal dominance as well as by ongoing celebrations of women's solidarity – the daily work of caring for individual women whose lives were damaged by patriarchy's oppressive system continued.

To this end, and after much planning in each case, Townsville saw the establishment of a significant raft of services for women: the Women's Shelter, the Rape Crisis Service, the Women's Centre, the Women's Legal Service, the Women's Community Health Centre, Tugulawa Women's Aboriginal Corporation, the North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service; and the consolidation of the Queensland Women's Health Network (*see* later in this section).

One benefit of this cascade of services – the development of one service leading to another – was that the knowledge and skills learned from each, helped the next. The close working relationships and collegiate approach across women's services in Townsville were often remarked upon, and were even a source of admiration, in other locations. These were forged by feminist passion and energy and supported through a range of networks and activities, but perhaps the size, location and character of Townsville itself also played a part. The city was compact enough to enable easy connection while still large enough to attract and support much needed resources. An additional unifying factor was the commitment that all agencies had, not only to Townsville as a regional centre, but also to servicing the vast North Queensland area.



'Safe'
Arriving at the women's
shelter – Sera's
 (Painting by Mary Norman,
 reproduced with permission)

Townsville Women's Shelter (Sera's)

The Townsville Women's Shelter, later known as 'Sera's', was established in 1975 and was the first specific service for women in the community.¹³

During the 1970s, the issues of domestic violence and sexual assault became more prominent in the public domain, and the early women's movement identified the need for action to be taken by governments to address such violence and to provide appropriate services for women.

¹³ Source: Much of the information pertaining to this early period in the life of Sera's was drawn from the very helpful summary *Townsville Women's Shelter herstory 1975–1995* (1995) written by Elissa Edie, Renee Limpus, Natalie Pace, and Tracey Petersen (used with permission). The report is held at the service.

Women everywhere were raising their voices and demanding action from government, but they were also prepared to take matters into their own hands.

In Townsville in 1975, Joan Innes Reid, municipal social worker and member of the Townsville City Council (later Deputy Mayor), together with the local branch of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), called a meeting to consider how best to provide support for women and children escaping domestic violence in North Queensland.

The meeting determined that there was an urgent need for a dedicated women's shelter to be established in the city, and immediately formed a Steering Committee of five local women whose first task was to secure some finances. To this end, they launched an appeal for community funds and quickly raised a very encouraging \$1,000.

They also lobbied government but with little result. In her important book, *Tropical odyssey of a pioneer social worker in North Queensland*, Joan Innes Reid notes that "at the time the Queensland Government was not sympathetic to such women's and children's crisis centres: labels such as 'libbers, lesbians and marxists' were glibly used by male politicians to denigrate this facility for victims of domestic violence ..." (1996 p. 108).

Despite this initial lack of support from government, the work of establishing a shelter began in earnest. The Steering Committee rented a house, staffed it with volunteers and funded it through private donations. The Townsville Women's Shelter was officially opened in May 1975 – coincidentally International Women's Year.

Over the following months, applications for government funding were made and resulted in the allocation of a small grant for rent and equipment, followed by a larger amount that was used to employ a part-time counsellor and an administrator. While this was a step forward, the Shelter still relied heavily on volunteers to staff the service, especially for overnight shifts, and on community donations of money and goods.

Over the next few years, finances continued to present a major challenge for the Shelter's Management Committee. The operational grant that had been received initially was withdrawn the following year and the Queensland Government remained suspicious of and, at times, downright hostile to, the initiative.

Pauline Woodbridge, long serving Management Committee Chairperson, notes: "The issue of government funding was a hotly contested topic within the refuge sector from early days. There were many meetings and conferences where attendees

Julie Walder, one of the founding members of the Women's Shelter, remembers those very early days:

"WEL members had become engaged in the issue when a taxi driver picked up a woman escaping violence and with nowhere to take her, and knowing that a group of women were having a meeting, he took her to the WEL meeting.

At that time, working at the Shelter involved all sorts of things and was very hands on for both staff and volunteers – making meals, washing up, changing nappies, scrubbing the bathroom and unblocking toilets! I remember one occasion where a mother left the Shelter, heading south, without her four-week-old baby, and I took the baby home with me until the mother was located.

In those early years, Women's Shelter staff and volunteers often used their own cars to go and collect women experiencing violence and bring them to the Shelter. At times they would also go with women to collect their belongings when the husband was at work. Sometimes they found the husband was at home and they needed to get out quickly!"

were split, with some welcoming the obvious benefits of accepting funding and others worried about the price to pay if governments used that funding to dictate the type of service provided. This was a real concern in an environment of hostility to women, and especially to feminist women."

However, it became imperative that adequate and reliable funding be sourced. Fortunately, in the late 1970s the federal government became involved, bypassing the states and allocating monies directly to the shelters. This enabled the Management Committee to better staff the service and to consider more permanent housing. In 1978, with funding from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) and support from key members of the community, they eventually located a large 'old-Queenslander' style house which, despite some difficulties, they were able to purchase.

One reason the purchase proved to be a difficult undertaking was that the Shelter was not an incorporated body and it required the establishment of a trusteeship in order to proceed with the sale. Under this interim arrangement, the sale was eventually realised while the Management Committee continued to work toward incorporation. Incorporation was finally achieved in December 1978, and meant that the service would then receive

funding directly and would also be solely responsible for meeting all accountability requirements.

There were various government funding arrangements over subsequent years but eventually, in 1980, the Shelter found itself with a more stable source of funds under the joint Federal–State Women’s Emergency Services Program (WESP).

However, under this model, they were required to contribute 12.5% of the total amount themselves. This meant fundraising, which was an onerous burden and diverted staff time away from core tasks.

In 1984, a new Commonwealth–state funding agreement was introduced. Called the ‘Supported Accommodation Assistance Program’ (SAAP)¹⁴ it incorporated WESP and, to everyone’s relief, it did away with the requirement for women’s shelters to raise a portion of the funds. It also meant improvements to the pay and conditions of shelter workers. However, notwithstanding these improvements, the need was enormous so there was still a heavy reliance on volunteers to cover all hours of the day and night.

Some further monies were also provided to the Shelter at this time by the DAA which meant that two dedicated Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander staff positions could be created, and they were filled by local Indigenous women, Lorraine Ross and Monica Bowie. This resulted in a higher usage of the Shelter

Nonie, a young volunteer at the Shelter at that time:

“In 1981 I was appointed to be the Saturday night staff person. This involved staying overnight at the Women’s Shelter – sleeping on the couch in the administrative office – in the front of the building, on the left. I was paid \$15 for the night. Mostly I just sat with women, made cups of tea, helped in the kitchen and answered any of their questions as best as I could. Sometimes I admitted women if they came during the night. One night a violent husband turned up at the Shelter yelling for his wife. He threatened to return with a gun. I phoned the police and they picked him up close by, with a gun! Needless to say, none of us slept well that night.”

14 SAAP was a joint Commonwealth–state program providing funding for transitional accommodation and support services for those facing homelessness. It was recognised that the major face of family homelessness in Australia was women with children fleeing domestic or family violence, and the focus of the program was on women and youth. Funding was renegotiated every five years. In 2009, the program was replaced by the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA).

by Indigenous women and a raised awareness of the Shelter's role within these communities.

By 1987, nearly ten years after the Shelter was first established, it was apparent that a new facility was required. Years of difficult financial negotiations, lobbying, planning and disappointments followed until, finally, in July 1995 – 20 years after the Shelter began initial operations – a new, purpose-built facility was opened. Named 'Sera's' in recognition of one woman who had accessed the Shelter over a number of years, the new complex provided a higher standard of security and independent living than had previously been possible.

In the years since, Sera's has continued to provide an essential service in Townsville and has grown and changed as circumstances, and government policies, required. Staff and successive management committees have maintained a strong feminist focus and have worked on raising awareness in the community. They have also placed a priority on providing placements for social work students from James Cook University, as well as other universities here and overseas.

At a regional level, staff from the Townsville Women's Shelter were closely involved with the North Queensland Women's Services Network, which brought together those agencies working with women across northern, central and western regions. The collaboration between services in these regional locations was a widely recognised strength of the Women's Services sector in this part of the world.

At a national level, staff and management were involved, over many years, in various high-level government forums and task forces and provided input into new legislation on domestic violence.

Over the decades, the Townsville Women's Shelter became a much bigger, more complex and more professional agency with significantly increased funding. While these monies were essential to continuing operations, Pauline Woodbridge

Over the years, a number of other women's shelters have operated in Townsville, including:

- **Maria House and Iona House** – the latter specifically catering for youth;
- **Flora House and Elsie House**, providing accommodation and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women; and
- **Kootana Women's Centre** on Palm Island (Bwgcolman).

notes that “[i]ssues around accountability for funding had long been contested. While everyone accepted that there was a need for a high level of accountability for monies received, different governments had, over the years, introduced more and more processes and required more and more time-consuming form-filling. This resulted in feminist organisations which were operating as collectives with a flat structure (such as the Shelter) being squeezed into adopting corporate-style structures – not a comfortable place for some feminist activists who were committed to a more cooperative style of working.”

‘Output-based funding’, introduced by government in 2012, did indeed take the service toward this more corporate style of management, although its community-based, grassroots underpinnings and its origins within the feminist movement remained obvious.

Some names have been lost to history but, where possible, key contributors are listed here:

Barbara Blomberg –
trustee for purchase of the
initial property (1978)

Joan Innes Reid, Julie Walder,
Kathleen Newnham and Susie
Dickson – awarded honorary
life membership in 1995 for
their significant role in the
development of the Shelter
from the earliest days

(Known) Shelter Coordinators:

Bindi Other-Gee (1977–1979)

Judy Taylor (1983–1986)

Julie Oats (1986–1988)

Vera Polikarpowski (1988–1992)

Jody Bell (1992–1995)

Lindy Edwards (1995–2021)

Kate Hoffensetz (2021–)

In 2015, the Queensland Government commissioned the report on domestic violence ‘Not Now, Not Ever’ authored by Quentin Bryce, former Governor-General of Australia. As part of the government’s commitment to implementing the recommendations contained in the report, additional funding was provided to shelters across Queensland. Sera’s received funding for a further ten properties and extra workers, in a most welcome move that saw the service funded at a level that allowed for growth and development, instead of being in constant survival mode.

With the new funding came a requirement to change from a more communal style of refuge to self-contained individual units. This was seen as providing more independent living for women and their children, but it eroded the strong sense of community

that developed in the older style of shelter where workers, volunteers and residents were all in together. It initially also caused much angst about the level of safety and support that could be provided.

Another struggle, in earlier years, centred around adoption of a pay award. Pauline Woodbridge recalls that “there were varying views about this. Even though, once the sector adopted the award, services became more professional, the gender pay gap remained huge, and, initially, the award came with none of the work-related benefits received by men. Eventually, with the help of the Women’s Unit in the union movement, there was a work comparison study done and women workers received a parity pay increase”.

Pay and conditions of workers steadily improved over the years, in recognition of the vital and difficult tasks they took on every day. The role of volunteers also changed considerably and the service no longer relied on volunteer effort to fill night-time rosters or raise funds; and where once volunteers staffed the overnight phone lines to take referrals, these were then dealt with via the Queensland-wide 24-hour hotline: DV Connect 1800 811 811.

However, the core business of the Shelter – providing a safe, secure haven for women and their children – has remained the same, and that work has always been supported by committed and passionate members of the management committee who ensured the ongoing growth and stability of the service.

The work of all those involved in the Shelter over the decades, in whatever capacity, needs to be acknowledged and honoured.

REFLECTIONS ...

Maureen Balue, who, in 1975, became the first counsellor at the Townsville Women’s Shelter, shares some early memories:

I saw the position advertised in the paper and I decided to apply for it. It was a part-time position and I thought it would suit me, especially given my previous experience in the area of marriage guidance. I recall that the interviewing panel for

the position included Peg Hayles (nee Robinson) Jacqui Hering and Merle Kenny, all of whom were well known in Townsville.

As it turned out, I was successful and went on to work in the position for about 12 months. During that time, I saw many distressed women and children coming into the Shelter, often arriving in the middle of the night, and sometimes wearing little more than their nightclothes.

It turned out to be a very demanding, but highly rewarding, job that often involved working many more than my allocated 20 hours per week. As well as counselling, I provided practical and emotional support to the women who came to the Shelter and I also kept detailed case notes. Things were done differently in those days. I had to write up all the records by hand, logging them in a large hardcover book which was then kept securely in the desk drawer.

While I managed the counselling load, I can clearly remember working alongside another very hard-working staff member, Mary, who was responsible for all the food and accommodation arrangements. Dr Dorothy Cole, a very well-regarded general practitioner, was also invaluable to us. I remember that she made herself available to meet any medical needs, as required.

Volunteers were also most welcome, and I remember my daughter, Liz, and her friend (both just young teenagers then) coming on the weekends and taking the kids who were staying at the Shelter down to the beach to play.

It's hard to believe that was 50 years ago now...

**Bindi Other-Gee, one of the first
Coordinators of the Shelter, recalls:**

I took up the position of Coordinator of the Townsville Women's Shelter in 1977 after having worked for 12 months as an antenatal social worker at the Townsville General Hospital.

These were still the early days of the Women's Shelter and I recall both the struggle to meet the high level of need and the fairly constant threat of having government funding withdrawn. Still, the Shelter maintained its focus on providing an essential service for women and consolidating its role in the community.

We faced a number of ongoing challenges, in particular, threats of violence from the partners of the women housed at the Shelter, many of whom were army spouses. After a serious threat from one such member of the military, I felt it necessary to relocate my home to Magnetic Island for safety. This precaution seemed prudent after police detained the man as he was headed to the Shelter with a shotgun in his

car. It was over this same period of time that a woman using the Shelter was, in fact, tragically killed by her partner.

Despite these traumatic events, I have such good memories of the dedication and commitment of the Shelter Management Committee and of my colleagues. There was a strong sense of harmony which generated a very positive working environment and a lot of job satisfaction. We felt that, together, we were providing a service which made a real difference.

I regard my years at the Women's Shelter as formative and fundamental to the path my career would take. In my professional life, I've done a lot of work with government and community organisations around Indigenous issues, and I credit my contact with the First Nations women at the refuge in Townsville with sparking my interest in, and passion for, working in this field. I found their sense of humour in the face of dreadful hardship and pain inspired me then, and continues to do so now.

In retrospect, I believe that the experience of working at the Townsville Women's Shelter over those early years shaped my values and my direction in life and perhaps those of my children. It certainly consolidated my commitment to feminism and to women.

**Lindy Edwards, the longest serving
Coordinator of the Shelter, shares her insights:**

I first worked at the Shelter as a part-time Child Support Worker before taking on the role of Refuge Worker and then, in 1995, stepping into the role of Coordinator.

Over my 26 years in the position, I've seen many changes and developments in the focus of the service and in the scope of the Coordinator role. One of the aspects of the role I was particularly pleased to be involved in was the establishment of the North Queensland Women's Services Network, which brought together shelters and specialist women's services from across North and Far North Queensland. This collaboration of all specialist women's services was something that was unique to the north of the state and it enabled a sharing of expertise and knowledge and created a strong lobbying voice to government. Through this collaborative approach we were able to ensure that there was an appropriate focus on the regions as well as the south-east corner. The network was very cohesive and regarded as highly effective and I found my involvement in it (and in the national peak body, WESNET, as State representative) a very rewarding part of the role.

In looking back, I can also see how the changes that came with additional funding from the Queensland Government in 2015 allowed Sera's to develop into

a more comprehensive women's service, incorporating outreach and transitional support, rather than a women's shelter providing only crisis accommodation. With this broader approach, awareness of the issues grew, and we could initiate changes to suit local circumstances as well as continuing to work on improving understanding in the community.

Work in a women's refuge is stressful and demanding, but what sustained me over those many years was the knowledge that we were part of something bigger and we were making a difference. I also valued the strong and unfailing support of the Management Committee and the other staff, as well as the chance to network with some wonderful women across the country. Perhaps most of all I have been inspired and uplifted by the strength and resilience of the women who have used the Shelter over the years. So many amazing stories!

Townsville Rape Crisis Service

From the early days of the movement, women began to mobilise against rape and sexual assault – issues that were identified as key components in the ongoing oppression of women – and they worked to confront these crimes. Their message was simple: they demanded an end to rape!

Like many other feminist grassroots organisations, the Rape Crisis Service had several iterations and designations. It began in 1978, with the aim of raising awareness and organising public seminars each year.

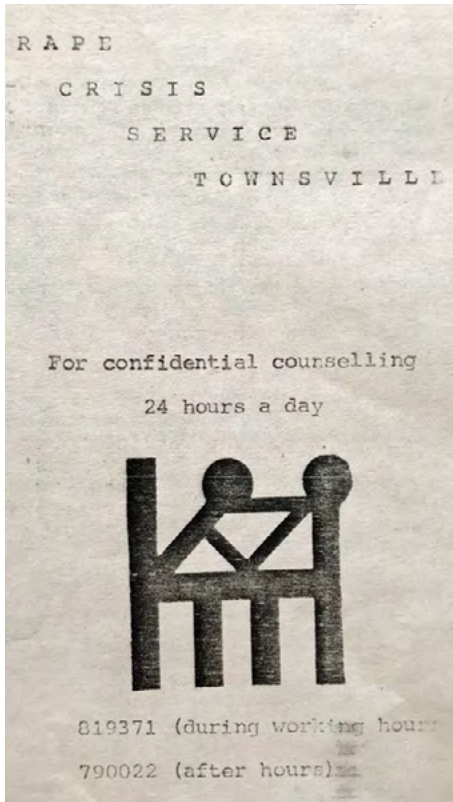
In 1979, an autonomous body, called the Sexual Assault Counselling Service, set up a 24-hour referral system linked in with workers at the Townsville General Hospital who were providing sexual assault support during working hours. The Sexual Assault Counselling Service was supported by Lifeline, Community Health and other local agencies through a 24-hour telephone roster (Source: Sexual Assault Counselling Service pamphlet, circa 1978).

This original service then became the 'Townsville Rape Crisis Association' but this was temporarily dissolved in 1980. Other active women's groups, such as the Women's Electoral Lobby, then tried to fill some of the gap by providing public education. Fortunately, the service was re-formed in 1981 and was then known as the 'Rape Crisis Service' (RCS).

In 1983, the RCS began a media campaign that resulted in increased referrals and greater community awareness. A small government grant in June that year

allowed for the employment of a coordinator, development of a constitution, and the election of a management committee. Members of the community were invited to join the Service for a small fee.

Submissions to both the federal and state governments highlighted the fact that rape crisis services did not fit within any of the funding schemes available at the time. The funding question was passed between the two political levels, with contention over whether or not the issue was a health matter and thus belonged to the state, or a social welfare issue for which the federal government should take responsibility. Many feminists lobbied vigorously for the latter position. However, even as these debates continued, small amounts of funding “trickled in and were gratefully received,” as reported by the President of the Management Committee, Dr Betty McLellan, at the 1984 Rape Crisis Service Annual General Meeting. These funds allowed for the employment of a coordinator for ten hours per week. The July 1984 Minutes record the satisfaction felt by the Committee in relation to the positive efforts of the Coordinator, Bronwyn Patton, in developing awareness in the community of the ongoing need for a rape crisis service.



*A very early
Rape Crisis Service pamphlet
(Artist unknown at time of publishing)*

“The Rape Crisis Service was founded on feminist principles and I found much support for this approach through my involvement in the Townsville Feminist Collective.

The Collective, at this early time, was a group of strong women who were keen to work towards their own personal feminist development, but also towards **the establishment of women’s services in Townsville.”**

Bronwyn

During her ten hours per week, Bronwyn provided a service out of a small office on the verandah of her home. The job included being on call at all hours and raising awareness among a broad range of potential referral sources, including the police and other welfare agencies. She provided a much-needed counselling and support service, as well as continuing to seek future funding and expansion opportunities. Her work was closely linked with other feminist activities and organisations in Townsville.

Community education was a major underpinning of the service and was conducted through the provision of speakers, pamphlets, seminars and statistical information. Legal reform was also an important ongoing aim. The Management Committee members who supported Bronwyn's work included Betty McLellan, Dot Cole, Robyn Keast, Marg Whalley, Beattie Whalley, Mike Shapter, Lyn Tyson, Coralie McLean, Julie Oats, Robyn Lynn, Virginia Lees and Madge Sceriha, along with many others whose paid membership fees and donations kept the service afloat.

Minutes from the Annual General Meeting of July 1984 include a tribute by the President reflecting on the tireless work of those involved, as well as the energy invested in developing working relationships and raising awareness in the community. It is important to note that the focus on community education around rape and sexual assault was a priority, in order to challenge the myths and ignorance persisting in society.

The establishment of the RCS coincided with the setting up of other local women's services. Many activist women were involved across a number of these services and this helped ensure that they worked cooperatively together. In these early days, the new Women's Information and Referral Service (The Women's Centre) in Stanley Street provided Bronwyn with much appreciated office space for the provision of counselling and support services. She was also able to use their phone number for promotion of the service.

Minutes from March 1985 recorded that "the Rape Crisis Service [had] a good relationship with the Women's Centre and it [was] working well to have Bronwyn's office situated there". Bronwyn commented that this meant that her front verandah could go back to being just that (Rape Crisis Service Newsletter 1985).

It was 1986 when the RCS attracted another small amount of federal funding, which allowed the Management Committee to employ Bronwyn as a full-time permanent worker. At this time, Bronwyn, along with workers in rape crisis services across Queensland, was lobbying to have rape in marriage recognised as a crime. In Queensland, at the time, a husband could not be charged with raping his wife. This issue, too, was a long, hard-fought battle.

It was also in 1986 that a local group of social and community workers (including Bronwyn) were meeting and planning to develop a response to men's violence in the home. Called the 'Coalition on Criminal Assault in the Home' (CoCAITH), the group lobbied for Queensland to appoint a task force to amend legislation to protect women and children. Reports from task forces in other states had led to changes in the law and the same was needed here. The conservative Joh Bjelke-Petersen Government took lots of persuasion and it was 1988 before a task force was finally established. Laws dealing with men's violence against women and children finally came into effect in 1989 (Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force – *see* Department of Family Services 1988).

Meanwhile, after years of writing submissions and lobbying, full funding for a women's centre finally came in early 1986. It featured a combination of three distinct services for women, including the Rape Crisis Service. The RCS settled in as part of this combined service structure and, over decades, continued to meet Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) funding requirements and respond unwaveringly to the needs of the women who sought out the service for support.

North Queensland Combined Women's Services (The Women's Centre)

The Second Wave feminist movement had raised awareness of the importance of women-only space – a safe and supportive space where, together, women could work for a better world. In Townsville, they dreamed of creating a 'women's centre'. "Women's space is, in essence, an ideological framework for resistance" (Crawford, Miles and Plumb 2011, p. 115).

The early days

A vibrant volunteer-run Women's Information Centre operated in Townsville for a short time in the late 1970s. In her booklet, 'A women's historical and feminist tour of Townsville', Ann Rollins writes: "Although no longer in existence, the Women's Information Centre was formed in December 1978 with the prime purpose of establishing a centre run by women for women. It was there that the first abortion referral service was established. The centre also served as a meeting place for a lesbian group and women's liberation group. One group of women actually

published a book of poetry, *To the ladies and old hands*. The Centre was located at 199 Flinders Street” (Rollins 1984, section 16).

While it existed for only a few months, this venture demonstrated what could be achieved by passionate, committed women with a purpose. Soon after its demise, women were again discussing the need for another such centre.

A proposal was floated at the 1984 Townsville women’s conference ‘Women building a new world’ (see “Chapter 3”) and there it was decided that the time was right and a women’s centre could, and should, be set up again in Townsville. Follow-up meetings were called, a Women’s Centre Collective was formed and local women came together to make it happen.

The Women’s Liberation Movement globally was strong and active at that time and the Townsville Women’s Centre was to be an embodiment of that movement – shaped by feminist ideals and sustained by women’s energy and dedication. The Centre was to be run as a collective and operate from a feminist philosophy. Men were not to be given access to the space but all women were welcome.

From the beginning, the aim was to provide a feminist space for women – one that offered support, connection, opportunities for involvement, projects, activism, creative expression, and mostly, a base for women to work together building a new world.

The first task was to find a location. That turned out to be the easy part, as suitable office space was quickly found on the 1st floor of Atkinson House in the

Some of the women involved from the beginning were:

Jenny Down
Gwen Gorman
Janette Jacob
Virginia Lees
Coralie McLean
Betty McLellan
Bronwyn Patton
Bev Pehrson
Madge Scerhia
Jan Woodley

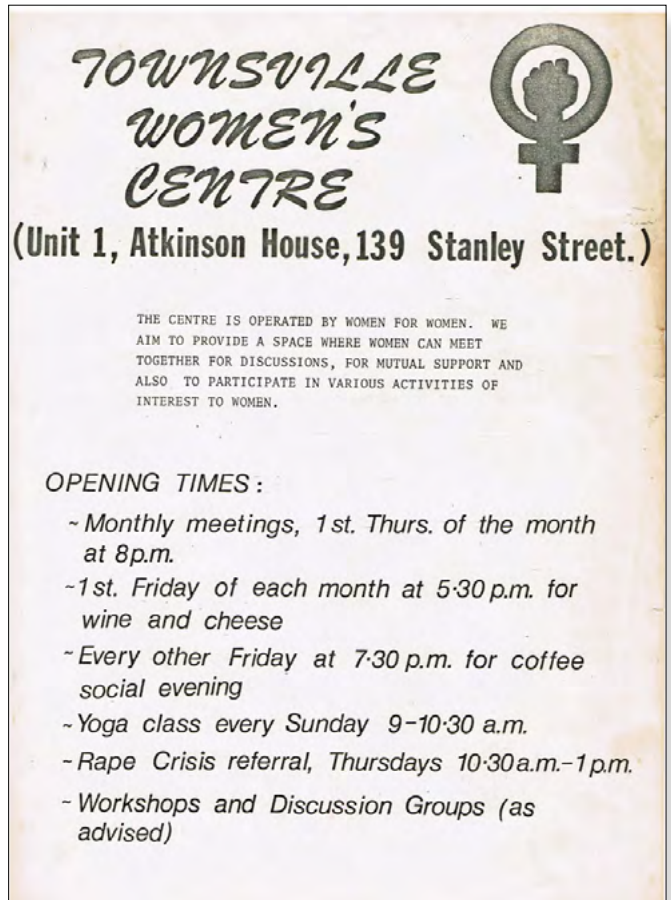
ORIGINAL COPY	RECEIPT No. 74
DATE: 4-10-1984	
RECEIVED FROM Coralie McLean	
THE SUM OF Twenty Dollars	
BEING FOR Rent Pledge	
\$ 20 —	
Jan XXXXXX	SIGNATURE

A pledge receipt from 1984

city centre, opposite the police station – and above a lingerie shop. The difficulty was that the group had no financial support whatsoever. So how was the rent to be paid?

The solution was a pledge system. Collective members donated \$20 per month (or whatever they could afford), which turned out to be enough to pay the rent and the phone and keep the Centre supplied with coffee and biscuits – and, in August 1984, a unique resource for the women of Townsville opened its doors.

Although limited to weekends, some evenings, and three mornings a week, and equipped with only beanbags and cushions for seating, the boundless energy and enthusiasm of the volunteers more than compensated for any such shortcomings – and women came! They came seeking knowledge, connection, assistance, purpose,



The Women's Centre opening brochure (left) and an early flyer (right)

community. Things were quickly coming together and those early days were a promising beginning.

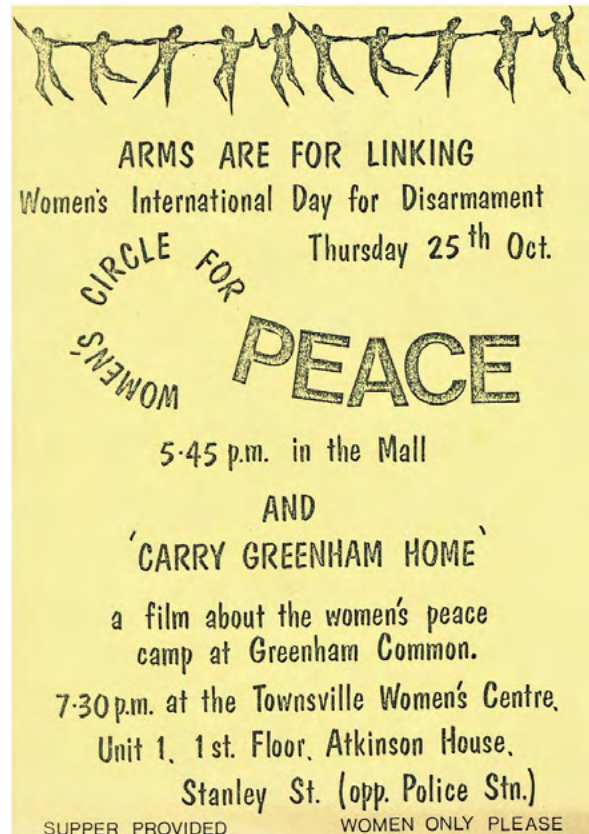
In November of that year, the Centre held an official opening. More than 90 women attended the opening, including representatives from the Palm Island Women's Resource Centre. The program featured various performances and displays, including a photographic exhibition titled 'Images of Women', which paid tribute to an earlier generation.

Susie Dickson, a long-time local feminist, was the Special Guest Speaker at the opening. She spoke of her involvement in women's activities in Townsville over many years. In particular, she recalled the fight for women's place in local government and reminisced about the inaugural meeting of the Local Government Women's Association (LGWA), which had been held 20 years previously and, coincidentally, in that very building!

Over the next eighteen months, the Townsville Women's Centre found its stride. It hosted regular coffee nights and discussion groups. It offered short courses on a range of feminist topics and a variety of other classes. It curated exhibitions and displays and presented concerts and performances. Most of all, it provided a space for women to connect with each other.

Moreover, as a multi-purpose Centre, it acted as:

- a coordinating point for important issues, such as the campaign against abortion clinic raids (see "Chapter 1");
- a focus for women's rallies and forums (International Women's Day, International Women's Day for Peace and Disarmament, and so on);



*Women's International Day
for Disarmament flyer*

- a venue for visiting feminist writers and scholars (some with national or international reputations, for example: Frigga Haug, German socialist feminist theorist; Nell McCafferty, Irish writer and abortion lobbyist; Emily George, Melbourne writer; Kay Schaffer, lecturer and writer from Adelaide); and
- a location for the (part-time) Townsville Rape Crisis Service (*see* previous section).

Through it all, the Collective maintained financial support for the Centre using the pledge system. However, this could not continue indefinitely and the group was constantly looking for funding opportunities. An opportunity for some creative action popped up in September 1985, when Prime Minister Bob Hawke and his Cabinet held a regional meeting in Townsville. A Labor Party dinner was planned as part of the proceedings and members of the Women's Centre Collective managed to wangle an invitation. Betty, one of the Collective members, recounts what happened:

“We made up these scrolls with the message ‘fund women’s services’ in purple and green and placed one on every plate at the top table so that the PM and his Ministers would see them as they sat down to dinner. A group of us sat together at a table at the back, watching as the delegates opened their scrolls. We all focused on Bob Hawke, waiting to see his reaction. He picked up the scroll – we held our breath. He slipped the ribbon off, opened it and read it – **FUND WOMEN’S SERVICES**. Then he rolled it up again, put the ribbon back on and put it aside. That was that. But we felt we had scored a victory. The Prime Minister had personally received our message.

“And the next day we received an invitation to meet with Don Grimes, Minister for Community Services. No promises were made, but we had been heard.

“Shortly afterwards, we submitted yet another application for funding and, this time, to our astonishment and joy, we were successful!”

This essential funding (provided under the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program – SAAP) was transformative, as it enabled the establishment of an innovative and different type of women’s service in Townsville. ‘The Women’s Centre’ now became ‘North Queensland Combined Women’s Services’ (NQCWS) and it incorporated three separate components: a Refuge Referral Service, a Rape Crisis Service, and an Information and Referral Service.

In quick succession, staff were recruited, new premises were secured at 50 Patrick Street in Aitkenvale, and the existing Women’s Centre was relocated from the city to the suburbs, becoming NQCWS. Importantly, the original spirit

“This was enormously exciting to the many women involved and a search immediately began for an appropriate property. The house we eventually found in Aitkenvale was a large one, and much refurbishment work was needed to establish an appropriate work environment, as well as a comfortable space for women to visit. We even painted a colourful rainbow in the children’s room. Policies and procedures were established based on feminist principles, volunteers were trained and networks were established with many agencies, and so much more. **The development of a fully funded, cohesive, 24-hour support and referral service for women was a dream come true** and, from the earliest days, was supported by so many women in the community.” *Bronwyn*

of the Women’s Centre and many of its informal women-centred activities went too, and they continued alongside this newly funded arrangement. Thus, NQCWS became a broad, multi-purpose entity, providing both the core business it was funded for and a dedicated space for a wide range of other feminist activities and endeavours. (Interestingly, the name ‘The Women’s Centre’ stuck, and is still in general usage today to describe both the location, and the service.)

In addition to its vital counselling, referral and support role for women in crisis, the Women’s Centre provided:

- a meeting space for groups, such as the Women’s Radio Collective, the Small Collective, the Australian Women’s Party;
 - a venue for Gertrude’s ‘Salon’ for Women – a monthly pop-up cafe experience;
 - a focus for the planning of significant events in the feminist calendar, such as International Women’s Day;
 - ad hoc learning opportunities, such as forums, panels, short courses, lectures;
- rehearsal space for plays, concerts and other performances;
 - support and sponsorship for two international feminist conferences, as well as a number of local conferences focused on women.¹⁵

Importantly, it also enabled and supported the planning for further women’s services, such as a women’s legal service and a women’s health service.

¹⁵ For a full account of the Women’s Centre’s first decade, see McLean (1994).

Once funding was received and North Queensland Combined Women's Services was established, the 'Women's Centre Collective' became the 'Townsville Feminist Collective' – and members have continued to meet monthly at the Centre since that time (see "Chapter 2").

REFLECTIONS ...

Jan Woodley remembers her involvement in the early days:

I consider myself to be very privileged to be one of the women who started the Townsville Women's Centre. It was in those very early days that I realised I was a feminist – and my world opened and blossomed. In those heady days we came to understand that we could actually do almost anything, if we set our minds and hearts to it. By educating, discussing, planning we could make an enormous difference to women's lives.

I have always been a shy person and lacked self-confidence but working with such wonderful women taught me that I too could make a difference. I was a member of the management group, the Feminist Collective and the very enjoyable Judy Small Collective, where we invited notable singers like Judy Small, Peggy Seeger and Jess Hawke Oakenstar to Townsville to perform for very enthusiastic feminist audiences. I participated in the marches, rallies, workshops and conferences we held, and I felt that my world just kept growing.

Emma Woodley offers a daughter's perspective:

My mum became a radical feminist during my childhood. This would be a foundational influence on me and shape my development into womanhood. Although her messages were sometimes contradictory – "Sit like a lady, Emma!" nestled alongside "Women can do anything!" – the ideas she brought home, along with the friends she brought home, challenged me to critically re-think the world I was emerging into.

Mum was a founding member of the Townsville Women's Centre, and while it has been many decades since I have been there, it has loomed large in my

consciousness as a practical feminist expression of women's activism. There I learned about the importance of women-only spaces as sites of recovery, rejuvenation, education, organising, strength and power. And there I learned that almost everything I knew about the world – relationships, families, workplaces, states, religions – were sites for feminist critique, transformation and sometimes outright rejection. I saw women of all shapes and sizes and sexualities. I saw women organise against violence and sexism and misogyny. I saw women be loud and angry and take up space. And I saw women be fiercely on the side of women – believing them, caring for them, advocating for them. I learned that the category 'woman' was a place of pride and identification and strength.

These ideas had to work hard to combat my other dominant teen influences – *Dolly* magazine and Molly Ringwald romance movies – but they have held fast throughout my life. Without that early experience, I wouldn't have majored in Women's Studies; I wouldn't have pursued feminist postgraduate work; I wouldn't be raising my son to see and think in feminist ways beyond his own dominant teen influences. I don't think it's too obvious a truth to say that without my mother, her friends and the Townsville Women's Centre I wouldn't be half the woman I am today.

Building an innovative service

As outlined above, when first funded in February 1986, North Queensland Combined Women's Services was set up within the existing Women's Centre premises in Stanley Street in the city. It combined three distinct projects:

- a Women's Information and Referral Service which was coordinated by Lee Pickard and provided a women-only space for those who needed help with a range of issues – counselling, support and information, emergency relief funds, community education – as well as a place for women to come to meet other women;
- the existing Rape Crisis Service coordinated by Bronwyn Patton; and
- a new Shelter Resource Unit, coordinated by Viv Atkinson, providing a shop-front access for women and children experiencing domestic violence, and offering support, counselling and referral to the Townsville Women's Shelter.

While NQCWS operated very effectively from the beginning, it really hit its stride with the move to the new premises at 50 Patrick Street in November of that year. This new accommodation, situated in a large suburban house close to a major shopping centre, provided the project with the opportunity to quickly develop, expand and consolidate.

The Centre offered innovative, needs-based programs while operating from a broad feminist philosophy, a consensus decision-making model, and a non-hierarchical structure (all staff undertook reception and intake duties, as well as their specialist tasks, and all were paid the same pro-rata amount).

The workers at the Women's Centre at this time, most of whom were employed on a part-time basis, took on a variety of general and specialist roles. These were:

- counsellor – providing crisis counselling, group work, ongoing support and community education;
- rape crisis worker – working with women and children who had experienced sexual assault;
- centre development worker – assessing community needs and developing programs to meet these;
- centre worker – organising rosters for on-call crisis workers, child care, volunteers, and so forth;
- administrator – administering project funds.

“Working in the development and establishment of women’s services in the 1980s and 1990s in Townsville was an exciting time for feminists.

There was solid personal support, and an opportunity to develop services to support women in a time when women were largely a silent group who needed to start yelling loudly.”

Bronwyn

The Centre was consistently busy and workloads were heavy. Statistics over this period reveal high usage, averaging around 1,000 contacts with women per month. Feedback from women using the Centre was largely very positive, with a number opting to stay involved by taking on volunteer roles. When surveyed, local agencies indicated that they viewed the service as “vital, exciting, responsive and meeting a significant need for women in North Queensland” (McLean 1994, p. 236).



REFLECTIONS ...

**Pauline Woodbridge, worker at the Women's Centre
from 1989 to 1994, reflects on some of her experiences:**

I was initially engaged as the Homelessness Worker and then, in 1990, took on the newly created position of Centre Development Worker. In that role, I did 'grassroots' work designed to assess the needs of women attending the Centre and then help to meet those needs by developing new activities and programs. I also contributed to developing and nurturing new women's services in the community.

The feminist values espoused by the service underpinned every aspect of the culture and informed the way the staff worked with the women attending the Centre. The declaration that this was a women-only space was seen as an outrage in some quarters, with the threat of withdrawal of funding being issued by one local politician. The idea of 'women working for women' was radical, and the concept of 'believing her story' flew in the face of the prevailing legal and societal views that women were manipulators and liars. In all that we undertook, we had a passionate commitment to work for social and political change. We also took the view that we should work to ensure that, in the longer term, our services would no longer be needed.

For the staff, there were challenges in working as a collective when providing service on a daily basis. The collective model traditionally needs time, effort and the opportunity for debate to achieve consensus decision-making – a process often at odds with the need to get a quick answer. Some staff relished the opportunity to discuss process, emotions and solutions, but for others who were more practically oriented, this could be frustrating.

The collective structure was not appreciated by the funding body. Along with the media, they took issue with not knowing who was 'in charge' and who could talk on behalf of the organisation. In 1987, the funding body asked for a review of the service and so an interim committee was formed to undertake this task.

This interim committee was required to review the management structure, re-define staff roles so that responsibilities were shared, and evaluate the efficiency of the service to date. The outcome of the review was a report to government that,

while outlining some suggested revisions, recommended the continued funding of the service and noted its high standing within the community.

I found that being part of a feminist collective – both as a management member, and as a worker during two periods of employment at the Centre – was a wonderful experience. My feminist understanding developed and I found this supported my community welfare and community development studies.

I loved how the Centre was festooned with feminist posters and feminist sayings on the walls. Feminist colours were everywhere and it had one of my favourite places – a feminist library space. Other activities also happened in the downstairs area of the Centre. I particularly liked being involved with Gertrude’s ‘Salon’ for Women. Once a month, after the Centre closed, we would set out the tables and chairs, lay out the cups, saucers and plates, and make the space ready for the cafe-style evening, where we got to listen to amazing feminist speakers.

I worked at the Women’s Centre until 1994, when I left to set up the North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service (*see* later in this chapter) – a brand new regional domestic violence service in Townsville, auspiced by the Coalition on Criminal Assault in the Home (CoCAITH). This was another important feminist service to add to the burgeoning Townsville Women’s Services sector, and I worked there until my retirement in 2019.

Changing with the times

While continuing to provide a range of core services, the Women’s Centre also saw continued growth and development, as well as much change, through the early years of the 21st century.

Despite operating in a political environment that consistently failed to resource women’s services adequately, and increasingly tied insecure funding to a narrow output-based service delivery model, the Centre maintained its high priority on feminist analysis. Some changes, however, were inevitable.

In the early 2000s, at the directive of government funding bodies, NQCWS moved away from a collective structure. It subsequently

The Women’s Centre moved from a **collective structure to a management structure** in the early 2000s. **Centre coordinators** since that time were:

Morgan King

Ines Zuchowski

Cathy Crawford

established a coordinator position along with a management committee to oversee coordinator and staff.

As with most other women's services, the Women's Centre continued to struggle with funding. Client numbers grew but the funding amounts failed to match the increased demand. Between 2005 and 2010 client contacts increased from 13,629 contacts per year to 21,200.

“Across the world, women's services have ventured into areas others have avoided; they have effectively modelled **alternative governance structures, alternative leadership styles, and different models of service delivery**; and they have forced mainstream organisations to take women and women's concerns seriously.

In many cases they have achieved these outcomes by creating spaces and places where women can not only seek refuge, find safety and access resources but also learn new skills, contribute their knowledge and experience, participate in activism, and support and nurture each other” (Crawford et al. 2011, p. 112).

While staff members were actively involved in meeting this demand, they also worked on broader strategies, including strengthening partnerships with other organisations, such as Queensland Police Service, and on consolidating the position of the Centre within state and national networks.

By 2010, changes to funding agreements were starting to refocus the way the service was delivered at the local level. A new Specialist Homelessness Service was incorporated into Centre functions, changes were made to the Sexual Assault Support Services, and there were flow-on effects for the level of 'drop-in' counselling that could be offered. The 24-hour support phone line ceased to operate altogether.

At the same time, the Women's Centre staff and management were confronting the reality that they had outgrown their accommodation, and their premises were becoming increasingly unsuitable. In the wet season, water poured down the inside walls, and parts of the building would then become unsafe and need to be closed off.

Thus began the search for more suitable premises. Over the ensuing years, many fruitless attempts were made to find new accommodation, while demand for services continually increased and efficiencies and economies were constantly sought to try to manage within budget.

Here to stay

Eventually, in 2018, after much lobbying and many representations, full government funding for a new location was approved. The following year, construction of purpose-built premises at Charles Street, Aitkenvale, finally began and, in October 2020, the new-look Women's Centre was officially opened.

Much effort was invested in ensuring the new premises were welcoming, safe and easily accessible. New and expanded activities were now possible and demand for services increased yet again.

The focus of the Centre remained on providing core services:

- Sexual Assault Support Service
- Specialist Homelessness Service
- Women's Health Service

and on developing these even further as additional funding became available.

In particular, in 2017, temporary funding was obtained for the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) – a multidisciplinary, inter-agency group of professionals, established to work alongside victims of sexual violence to provide a response that is sensitive, holistic and timely. This innovative program worked in conjunction with the Sexual Assault Support Service and eventually received ongoing funding in 2020. The Women's Centre subsequently became recognised as a leader in the Sexual Assault Support Services sector.

The Women's Centre has continued to partner with other groups and services, such as the Townsville University Hospital

Over the years, a number of women's organisations have contributed to improving the status of women. While many of these would not necessarily identify as feminist, they have nonetheless promoted women's interests and supported key issues pertinent to women's well-being.

Service clubs such as the Soroptimists and Zonta have taken up issues including: the trafficking of women, violence against women, and international aid for women and girls. They have been active in highlighting International Women's Day events and have partnered with United Nations Women's Agencies to bring highly regarded overseas guest speakers to these forums. On a practical level, they have worked to support local women's services in their endeavours to improve women's lives.

which has provided regular midwifery services at the Centre, and with Townsville Soroptimists as part of the ‘Safe Nights’ program. There were 248 nights of accommodation paid for by this program in 2022–2023.

Local community-based services, such as North Queensland Women’s Legal Service, Townsville University Hospital, Centrelink, and others, have offered services on a regular, or occasional, basis from the Women’s Centre.

In addition, a range of support groups and activities have been on offer, such as:

- Senior Women’s Group
- yoga sessions
- Writing Group
- Survivors of Torture and Trauma Support Group
- arts and crafts groups
- Music Group
- form-filling service.

The Centre has maintained a focus on activism by organising events such as: Sexual Violence Awareness Month and International Women’s Day; and hosting the annual Candlelight Vigil in remembrance of women and children who have died as a result of domestic and family violence.

The Women’s Centre has also placed a high priority on maintaining strong links with community organisations generally, and other local women’s services in particular. This local connection is exemplified in the joint agency Annual General Meetings (AGMs) involving the Women’s Centre, Sera’s Women’s Shelter, the North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service (DVNQ) and, until its funding was withdrawn in 2022, the Queensland Women’s Health Network.

“Maintaining a feminist analysis high on the political agenda is just as crucial today as in the past if the rhetoric and the structural inequalities that marginalise women are to be changed”
(Crawford et al. 2011, p. 123).

Operating from a clear feminist perspective, the Townsville Women’s Centre has met the challenges of a changing world over four decades, and firmly established its reputation as a dynamic, innovative and responsive service for women in Townsville.



REFLECTIONS ...

Di Plumb, Senior Counsellor at the Women's Centre (2008–2024), recalls:

I commenced work at the Women's Centre in 2008 and was involved in counselling, staff support and prison work.

I loved the approach taken at the Centre – the open door, the drop-in environment, the practical assistance offered alongside counselling and support. There were as few barriers to women attending as possible, and we strived to help them feel welcome and safe, as women were free to engage or not, as they chose. There were some amazing outcomes for women.

In the early days, the Centre provided Emergency Relief Funds (ERF) for women in need. I remember how we would receive donations of leftover bread – that was always 'feast or famine' and in any spare moments the workers could be seen packaging excess bread for freezing so we could distribute it later.

At that time, things were often chaotic, with women dropping in for a cup of tea, or for food vouchers, or to attend various groups as well as for counselling and referral, but this relaxed, inviting atmosphere meant that women often connected with the workers in a more personal and profound way.

Over the years, workloads steadily grew but there was no corresponding increase in funding. The Sexual Assault Service (until recently) had not received any increase in core funding since the 1990s.

At the same time, women's services were experiencing a higher level of scrutiny from funding bodies yet there seemed to be less awareness of the scope of our role. For us, it meant that it became increasingly difficult to undertake the broad range of activities that had long been associated with our service.

The move to the new, purpose-built premises in 2020 [was] wonderful and it has enabled the service to expand, although at the same time workloads have hugely increased, and the issues women seek support for have become increasingly more complex. This has meant that we have had to drop some of our long-standing practices, such as accepting drop-in donations, so that we can put more energy into

other things, particularly the 24-hour Sexual Assault Service. The Sexual Assault Support Team is very busy, and it is particularly demanding work.

Given the nature of our work, it is important that, within the service, there is a strong focus on support for staff. We have flat decision-making structures and easy access to each other, so you don't ever have to make decisions on your own. We also operate from clear guidelines and staff know what supports are in place. In terms of our philosophy, there has always been a strong feminist focus here and this is nurtured and supported.

Within the local community, the Centre has a high profile. I think we are seen as creative and flexible, and we have sound, co-operative working relationships with other services.

We believe there is room for us to grow even further, to meet women's needs in new ways. In the future, I would like to see services for children provided from the Centre – and lots of other new ventures to support women's well-being.

**Cathy Crawford, Women's Centre Coordinator (2006–2025),
shares some highs and lows:**

I started work at the Women's Centre in 2006 in a 12-month locum position, back-filling while the permanent coordinator took maternity leave. I was an experienced social worker with a background in sexual assault and forensic work which was very relevant to the role at the Women's Centre. However, this was a very different work context to my previous positions.

I was immediately struck with how busy the service was and how chaotic it could be at times, and I felt that this could be overwhelming and quite intimidating for women attending for the first time. One of my early priorities was to look at new ways to ensure that the Centre was accessible and welcoming and that women felt that this was a place where their needs could be met.

I was also very aware of the shortcomings of the building that had been the Women's Centre's 'home' for the past 20 years, and that it was no longer fit for purpose. The inadequate space and cramped conditions made effective working more difficult and, at times, exacerbated the high levels of stress and volatility.

At the end of the 12 months, my position became permanent and I straight away began lobbying for more suitable premises. This proved to be a hugely challenging task – quite traumatic at times, and one that would occupy many years and take sustained and concerted effort. There were many false starts and lost opportunities.

I remember the first major disappointment came in 2012. After we had worked hard to make our case, the then Labor State Government had, the previous year, come through for us and committed 2 blocks of land in Wotton Street, Aitkenvale. We were to get a brand-new purpose-built Centre on this site. This was a major breakthrough. However, before any work could commence, a change of government saw this commitment unceremoniously withdrawn and all ongoing consultations for a new building ceased.

We persevered in worsening conditions at Patrick Street but kept our goal in mind. And sometimes, amazing things happen. One day, out of the blue, I was contacted by three women who were solicitors working locally for the Department of Public Prosecutions. They told me that, in their work, they saw too much of the end results of violence against women and they wanted to help make a difference. When I explained that a new building was a priority, they formed the 'Sky Foundation' and set to work raising money to put toward this goal. These women – Skye Jerome, Megan Heywood and Kerri-Lee Fredericks – were fantastic. They involved others in the Foundation and, between 2014 and 2019, raised more than \$600,000 through their unflagging efforts.

Working with the Sky Foundation around fundraising in the business and corporate worlds was quite an eye-opener. This was all new to me and I found it involved a lot of hard work and much negotiation. At the same time, I continued lobbying our local State Members for government support.

Finally, it happened. In 2018, the State Government committed \$3.2m for a purpose-built facility and, in October 2020, the new Women's Centre opened its doors. It was a great outcome and the culmination of much effort from a lot of people over many years.

At the same time as our energies were invested in securing new premises, the ongoing day-to-day work of the Centre continued, and so too did our broader role in advocating for issues of concern to women. In my role as Coordinator, I have been involved in a number of National bodies and State-based working groups around the issues of women's health, sexual assault and homelessness and, at the local level, in joint working groups and networks with other agencies.

Over the years, the Centre had grown significantly but the number of women seeking support constantly increased too and this meant we were always having to review the services we could offer and revise our priorities. In 2016 we made the difficult decision to cease the drop-in function and, while all women were still welcome, it was expected that their visit would have a specific purpose. The

distribution of Emergency Relief Funds (ERF) also needed to become more streamlined, and this was achieved with one agency in the city taking on the coordination of ERF across agencies. We found, too, that we couldn't any longer take on the organisation of large, costly events such as DV Awareness Month as they drained too many of our limited resources. So, we pivoted to smaller, more targeted activities and actually found these to be just as effective. An example is our Candlelight rallies, jointly organised with other women's services and held at the Centre in May each year. These are always well attended.

As well as finding these efficiencies, we also looked at ways to improve internal operations and, over the years, have developed some really effective data and online case management systems. There is a huge focus on reporting to the funding body, which is time-consuming and imposes a heavy workload, so being fully digital helps with that.

These systems also enable us to gather better empirical data to support our claims for more resources and programs. The development of our sexual assault response in Townsville is an excellent example of that. A detailed submission for a joint agency 24-hour Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) was lodged in 2014 – to no effect. However, the following year, Townsville Police were funded to provide such a service. While this was welcome news, it was apparent to all that this would not succeed unless it was a cross-agency endeavour. So, we decided that the Women's Centre would join and, despite the lack of any funding, would undertake a 12-month trial using a roster system comprising those Centre staff prepared to take on the role. To their credit – and my delight – all the staff agreed, without hesitation, to take part.

We all worked so hard for 12 months, pulled the statistics and the evidence together, and proved the project's worth. In 2017, temporary funding was made available and, in 2020, ongoing funding finally came through. SART has been deemed a great success and, in fact, the Townsville approach is now seen as a model.

So much has happened during my time at the Women's Centre and there have been lots of changes over the years, but one thing has been constant – it has always been a place where women can come, a space that women can use for all sorts of activities – a centre that is open to all women.

North Queensland Women's Legal Service

With the development of a range of women's services in the local community, different needs were being uncovered. Important issues were being raised by the women who were using the services and one of these was access to legal support. Many women in crisis could not afford private legal advice and access to Legal Aid Queensland could sometimes be difficult. In fact, it often happened that women were not eligible for Legal Aid because their husband or partner had accessed the service first, thereby blocking this avenue of much-needed support.

The North Queensland Women's Legal Service (NQWLS) is an example of a community response to an identified need. Here is its story.¹⁶

In November 1992, 30 women met at the Women's Centre to discuss the possibility of setting up a women's legal service in Townsville. While it was possible to access the Women's Legal Service in Brisbane for telephone advice, it was clear there was a pressing need for a locally based legal support option.

It was also agreed that, in keeping with feminist values, the service would have a strong focus on lobbying for law reform. The extent and nature of the service would depend on the availability of funding and the level of support offered by local women lawyers and others.

The meeting established three areas for immediate action involving:

- local fundraising;
- a feasibility study including exploration of ongoing funding options; and
- a one-week trial offering free legal advice to gauge levels of support and uptake in the community.

Action around local fundraising began immediately, with the first event held later in that month. This was a dinner at Casa Bianca restaurant which 60 women attended, raising a total of \$380. Other fundraising events followed, including a women's dance at the Hermit Park Hotel in January 1993.

Pauline Woodbridge, who was part of the early planning and development of the service, remembers how things progressed from there:

16 Source: This contribution draws on material on the NQWLS website that records the history of 25 years of the service – a story of empowering women and helping them to rebuild their lives (used with permission, <<https://www.nqwls.com.au/history>>, accessed March 2024). It also includes recollections from Pauline Woodbridge OAM, Life Member of NQWLS.

“Madge Sceriha and I, as Women’s Centre workers (along with others), took on the project”, she said. “Firstly, we wrote to local women lawyers asking if they would be interested in providing pro bono support to the women who accessed the Women’s Centre. A number of lawyers agreed in principle and were willing to trial an arrangement by phone. At this time there was new phone technology available whereby three people were able to be connected at the same time.

“We set up an evening service at the Women’s Centre once it was closed for the day. We had a roster of women lawyers available from 6 to 8 pm on Thursday evenings. We typed up flyers to let women know what we could offer, and we learned how to connect the lawyer to the women who called in. Madge and I would talk to the woman, provide support and information and ask about her legal issue. We would then put her on hold, contact the lawyer to pass on a summary of the legal issues, and finally connect the caller to the lawyer.

“It mostly worked. There were a few teething issues with the high-tech phone, the lawyer roster and the odd missed call, but the feedback we received was positive as the women felt they were listened to, believed and had a practical plan towards safety”.

Around the same time, women in Cairns were also keen to have a specialist legal service for women in the far north of the state. After much passionate discussion and lots of hard work, the two groups presented a joint funding proposal to the federal government. The Townsville trial provided proof-of-need and formed the basis of the submission.



Pauline Woodbridge taking a call for the women’s legal response trial phone in

Their efforts were successful and, in 1996, funding was obtained under the Keating Government’s \$160 million Justice Statement initiative for a specialist legal service to cover all of North and Far North Queensland.

The journey towards implementing this outcome

provided its own adventure. The requirement to negotiate and plan across the whole area meant joint meetings needed to occur. This was managed by using Cardwell as a halfway location. The women involved would regularly drive up from Townsville and down from Cairns to meet at a motel in Cardwell to talk out the many sticking points, and the different points of view. Each group had its own agenda, but all were driven by passion and a belief that the service could be achieved.

The women argued that more resources were needed to provide services across two major cities – four to five hours' drive apart. The department responsible for the funding contracts did not seem to fully understand the barriers that such distances imposed for women across this large region. The group's response was to create a map of the whole northern and far northern areas of Queensland, with a map of Victoria superimposed on top. This graphically demonstrated the geographical challenges facing the group.

In December 1996, a total of 75 women from Mackay, Townsville and Cairns, using a phone link-up, elected the first Management Committee to guide the significant amount of work that lay ahead. The size of the turnout for the meeting was a



Madge Sceraha (left) and Pauline Woodbridge leaving Townsville to meet with women workers from Cairns, to plan a funding submission to set up legal services for women in the North Queensland region

clear indication of the commitment to build a successful, effective legal service for women.

Through long and difficult discussions at many (and frequent) meetings, the Committee worked through the challenges they faced. Staff were employed, offices were set up in Townsville and Cairns, and a service delivery model was developed which ensured that women across the vast service region had the opportunity to access free legal help as required. For almost 30 years, NQWLS has successfully serviced North and Far North Queensland, meeting the needs of women across this large region.¹⁷

Women involved in the development of the North Queensland Women's Legal Service were always keenly aware of the particular issues faced by Indigenous women in their interactions with the legal system. In 1997, NQWLS received additional funding to provide specialist legal services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women across the region. A lengthy consultation with the community was initiated, and a Reference Group was established to guide the formation and work of an Indigenous Women's Unit (IWU).

Later, in 2005, the IWU became an incorporated and fully independent community legal service for Indigenous women. It was then called the 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Legal Service (NQ)' but was later known as 'First Nations Women's Legal Services Qld Inc' (FNWLSQ).

FNWLSQ has continued as a community legal service providing access to legal support and promoting law reform through community education, advocacy and representation. Based in Townsville, it extends its services to Palm Island and conducts outreach to Charters Towers and Ingham as well as to local organisations, such as the Women's Centre, the Women's Shelter and the Women's Correctional Centre. Remote assistance is also provided to other areas, such as Mount Isa and western Queensland.

The work of the dedicated staff of this important women's service must be acknowledged, as well as the particular impact of long serving cultural advisors, Florence Onus and Andrea Kyle-Sailor.

Time has shown that the women involved in all these endeavours have succeeded in realising their activist visions.

17 The names of some of the activists who were involved in this successful campaign were unknown at the time of writing, but it is important to note the contribution of all the workers at women's services in both Townsville and Cairns who brought the project to fruition. The struggles involved in achieving success should not be underestimated.

Townsville/Thuringowa Women's Community Health Centre

Women's health had been a primary focus of the feminist movement since the early days, with the first funded facility, the Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre, opening in Sydney in 1974.

In the late 70s and early 80s, the issue was prominent in Townsville. Dr Dorothy Cole, who campaigned strongly for women's right to control their own bodies, and local feminists such as Diana Russell, Virginia Lees and Anna McCormack, were among those behind the push for more autonomy in women's health at that time.

By the late 1980s, workers in women's services noted that the issue was still very pertinent. They found that women were often expressing disquiet about the fact that many male general practitioners did not take their health concerns seriously, and were looking for more appropriate information to enable them to manage their own health needs.

In response, local women combined their knowledge, enthusiasm and energy and established a Steering Committee to progress a proposal to set up a women's health centre to service Townsville and Thuringowa. Their vision was to create a vital and necessary feminist service for women.

A public meeting, held to further the project, attracted over 100 participants and it was clear that there was a high level of interest from doctors, nurses, midwives, social workers and the general community.

After extensive consultations, the Steering Committee drew up a three-stage plan for the project. The first stage was to offer a health information and referral service, the second was to incorporate clinical services in the form of medical consultations and alternative health appointments, while the final stage involved the establishment of alternative birthing services as an integral part of the program offered.

While the initial application for funding in 1989 was unsuccessful, a second submission in 1991 saw funds allocated for a centre that would provide access to health information for women (that is, stage one of the original plan). Consequently, the Townsville/Thuringowa Women's Community Health Centre began operations in July 1991. It was officially opened by Senator Margaret Reynolds on 20 February 1992 and achieved incorporation in 1994.

Originally located in a heritage building in Sturt Street in the city, and open from 10 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday, the new service was managed as a feminist collective.

The group was aware of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (PHAC n.d.) and adopted the five principles of the Charter as a guide for the new service. These were to:

- build healthy public policy;
- create supportive environments for health;
- strengthen community action for health;
- develop personal skills;
- re-orient health services.

Inspired by these principles, the Centre offered information on women's health and related issues in a safe, friendly, supportive and non-judgemental environment where women were welcome and encouraged to drop in. The free services were informal and relaxed, offering crisis support and referral to other agencies. There were also self-help and support groups available and a useful library of related women's health books and articles. At the Centre, they also provided education and awareness sessions and produced regular newsletters covering aspects of women's health and providing information about ongoing Centre activities.

Sadly, after ten years of operation the Management Collective, in consultation with the Queensland Department of Health, made a decision to temporarily close the Centre at the end of June 2000 while a review of the service was undertaken. This review was to involve re-assessing the level of need in the Townsville/Thuringowa community and determining the best model for ongoing service delivery.

As part of the review, a formal Needs Analysis was commissioned and undertaken. This involved a survey of the general public as well as key government agencies and community organisations. Some 847 responses were received to a

Women's Health Centre

workers at this
time included:

Barbara Gate,
Vanessa Gunthorpe,
Robyn Wansbrough,
and Lynne Wilson,
along with others.

questionnaire that primarily involved face-to-face interviews, and these revealed that the public overwhelmingly supported the services of the Women's Health Centre in the community.

As well as recommending the ongoing funding of the Centre, the final Needs Analysis Report also supported the relocation of the Centre to Aitkenvale, and a review of the management structure. This resulted in a change from a collective management style to a leadership hierarchy with a new management committee elected to carry out the transition and meet the requirements and expectations of the Department of Health.

At this point, in discussions with the Management Committee, the Department of Health indicated that, despite the recent changes, they were reluctant to continue funding the service. This resulted in anxiety about the prospect of losing the women's health funding from Townsville.

However, some of the Women's Health Centre's Committee members were also involved in other local services, and they undertook to lobby North Queensland Combined Women's Services (The Women's Centre) to take on the funding contract, and continue the provision of the type of health service that had helped so many local women to understand and manage their health needs. As NQCWS already provided a wide range of service options, a women's health service was seen to be a suitable and appropriate 'fit'. After much consultation and negotiation, the funding for a women's health service in Townsville, situated at NQCWS, was assured. The transfer took place in June 2001.¹⁸

Tugulawa Women's Aboriginal Corporation

Note: With the passing of some of the women involved in establishing Tugulawa, unfortunately much of its history has been lost, but those remaining were pleased to tell the story as they remembered it.

Tugulawa was an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's service established and maintained by local women, Esther Illin, Josephine Sailor, Florence Onus, Gracelyn Smallwood, Thelma McAvoy, Renata Price – to name but a few of

18 Source: Based on McLellan (2001) pp. 12–14.

the many women involved at various times. Tugulawa operated as a resource and referral centre, providing emergency relief funds and referrals to the Rape Crisis Service, and domestic violence safe places for women and children in crisis.

For years Tugulawa persevered with little funding. Esther Illin was active in her community and, in 1984, she secured funds to enlarge the premises which then became Flora House, offering emergency accommodation and support. Around this time, the two designated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worker positions funded at the Townsville Women's Shelter were transferred to Flora House, and Lyn and Willie Weatherall were engaged as support workers for families residing there.

Josephine Sailor became President of Tugulawa in 1987 when the organisation was incorporated. She was also active in developing many other services, such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service, Yumba-Meta Association, and the Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Service (TAIHS). Josephine networked with the local welfare services and had collegial relationships with local feminist women's services.

The women had lobbied hard for a shelter for the women and children of their community and Josephine spoke of their initial concern when, in 2010, after many years of operation, the funding for the service was transferred to the auspices of Yumba-Meta Housing Association. However, notwithstanding this change in management, crisis accommodation and support continued to be offered to First Nations women and children at Flora House.



Talking to people about Tugulawa often brought a reaction of, "Oh, I haven't heard that talked about for a long time". According to Esther Illin, while Tugulawa no longer operates as a service, it continues as an incorporated association.

In writing this short overview, it became clear that there are many unacknowledged activists, and many important milestones not yet captured in the story of Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services for women.

North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service (DVNQ)

In 1985, long before the Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Act became legislation, the Coalition on Criminal Assault in the Home (CoCAITH) was formed in Townsville as a community welfare committee with a flexible membership and a common focus around the issue of domestic violence. Regular meetings of the committee were held at the Family Court in Flinders Street, Townsville.

CoCAITH's three main aims were to:

- reduce the incidence of domestic violence in the community;
- promote community awareness of the issues associated with domestic violence; and
- coordinate and improve service delivery to those affected by domestic violence.

This group also participated in the successful campaign for the establishment of the Queensland Domestic Violence Task Force (1989).

In 1990, CoCAITH applied for pilot program funding under the Domestic Violence Initiative Program, and in 1991 received a twelve-month grant to research the issues in North Queensland. This produced a report that recommended the employment of specific rural and remote workers to address the gaps in services and promote awareness of domestic violence issues in this part of the state.

By mid-1992, CoCAITH had become a fully incorporated body and, in 1993, applied to the Queensland Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs for recurrent funding to establish a regional domestic violence organisation to service Townsville and the northern region. The findings of the earlier pilot program were used to inform the submission and this was ultimately successful.

**The North
Queensland Domestic
Violence Resource
Service (NQDVRS)
1994–2024
was rebranded as
'DVNQ' in 2024.**

Establishing the service

On receiving news of the success of their submission for a fully funded domestic violence service, CoCAITH Committee members quickly got to work. Positions

were advertised and applicants were short-listed. Vivian Anderson, Russ Frazer, and Lindy Edwards interviewed candidates for the coordinator role and selected Pauline Woodbridge for the position. Pauline's first task was to assist the Committee to design and set up the, as yet, unnamed new domestic violence unit.

Pauline reflected on the long wait for a response after her interview, and said she was later told the delay was because her work experience of ten years was in women-specific services. The funding for the new regional domestic violence service required the inclusion of men in various operating roles, and there was some uncertainty about whether Pauline would find this arrangement consistent with her feminist values. However, the decision fell in her favour and she subsequently proved very able to manage a feminist-based, women-focused service that included like-minded men in the management structure and on staff, as well as social work students on placement. **Work with men who used violence was a new direction in domestic violence services in Australia.** Pauline explained it was a good opportunity to show that feminist values were beneficial for women and for men.

During the first few months before premises were secured, Pauline worked out of both the Women's Shelter and the Women's Centre. She used her car as a base, and drove between each service, where she would 'borrow' the use of a telephone and other resources as she pursued the leasing of suitable premises for the new service. A dedicated vehicle was also purchased. During these early days, she used a milk crate to transport all the office supplies she needed for her working day!

These were busy days, and Pauline spent time with members of CoCAITH developing policies, drawing up job descriptions and recruiting three resource workers for the unit. Ines Zuchowski, Ann Surtees, and Kathy Krause were the successful applicants and, along with Pauline, made up the team.

Pauline recalls when the first computer was purchased:

"Ann Surtees was very protective of this new computer. It was swathed in a plastic cover when not in use. Workers were forbidden to have food or drink in the vicinity and we were certainly not allowed to touch it. **It felt like a brave new world.**"

At this point, an invitation came from Bronwyn Patton, Coordinator of the Community Justice Program, to share its office space on an interim basis pending more permanent arrangements. This offer was gratefully accepted, and it was here that all four new workers started together. They were joined shortly after by their first James Cook University social work student on placement.

One of the first tasks was to name the service and after consulting with the other local and regional women's services, the suggested name 'North Queensland

Domestic Violence Resource Service' (NQDVRS) was approved by CoCAITH and a logo adopted.

The new organisation was based on strong feminist principles and, although headed up by an Incorporated Association committee, a 'flat-as-possible' management structure was characterised by each position having full responsibility (directly supported by the coordinator) for applying the philosophy and achieving the aims of the service.

The focus was to work with other organisations towards an integrated response to domestic violence in the community and across the region, providing appropriate services for women and children seeking protection and safety. An integrated approach to domestic violence was seen as vital. It involved coordination between human service organisations, legislative bodies, police, courts and the whole community.

The original funding agreement required the development of an operational plan that would prioritise services in the following way:

The members of CoCAITH who were involved in obtaining funding and establishing the service included: Lindy Edwards, who fulfilled the role of President for many years; Madge Sceriha – Vice President; Bob Hinds – Secretary; and Vivian Anderson – Treasurer. All were original CoCAITH members who took an active role in supporting the new funding initiative. Other committee members over the years included Ginni Hall, Lis Cameron, Ros Marr, Ann Surtees, Amanda Nixon, Russ Frazer, Morgan King, Nick Nash, Colin Braiding, Suzy Dormer, John Boucher, Mark Lance, Joanne Baker, Bill Hinchcliff and Linda Janetski – all contributing their valuable experience.

In 2011, Madge Sceriha (1935–2016) social worker and feminist, was awarded CoCAITH'S first 'Life Membership', for her support and work with CoCAITH from 1984, and NQDVRS from 1994 to 2015.

- regional focus and resources 20%;
- education and training 25%;
- monitoring and coordination 15%;
- direct service delivery 40%.

By July 1994, NQDVRS, in a rather unconventional move, chose premises on the 3rd floor of the (then) MLC building in the city centre (a space previously used by the Townsville Welfare Council) which was within the budget and needed very little renovation. Traditionally, women's services tended to be set up in comfortable suburban houses or cottages, often with an undisclosed address, however the Coordinator had clear criteria for the location and this new space ticked all the boxes. The service was accessible and was close to the Courts and opposite the police station. It also provided easy access to the local bus services and included appropriate disability access. Furthermore, it addressed the specific safety aspect of exposure for the women using the service, as entering a large office block could be for any purpose.

It was seen as important for each worker to have their own office, with natural light via windows. Their doors would generally remain open unless meeting with women seeking assistance, when the door would be closed for privacy and safety. A private waiting area, a separate lunch room, toilets, a library, and children's play area were all quickly set up and appropriately furnished. Conradson (2003) notes the importance of developing services in which women can experience an 'ethics of encounter' by facilitating connectedness between women.

In accordance with the 'flat' structure, it was the norm for the workers, whatever their role or position, to be involved in all aspects of the service: answering the door and the phones, making tea or coffee, and ensuring the women and children accessing the service were feeling safe and comfortable. A brochure was compiled with information about the service and how to make contact. This, along with a whole suite of leaflets covering details of available support, was displayed in-house, and also circulated widely throughout North

"The work we were doing really fascinated me, as it had great potential for bringing about social change. At the same time, it was challenging: sometimes society's prevailing negative attitudes and values in regards to women and domestic violence, especially in the legal system, seemed too ingrained to be successfully confronted." Ines, original staff member NQDVRS 1994

Queensland. The first edition (1 December 1994) of a regularly produced quarterly newsletter announced the scope and purpose of the newly funded service and introduced the workers.

In 1995, the Women's Shelter administration office co-located with NQDVRS in their premises on the 3rd floor. This was to comply with the funding body's new direction for women's shelters, namely that office space should not be located within the shelter complex where women and children were housed. It proved to be a positive initiative and it worked well for the two closely connected services to be co-located.

The office was busy and the team were engaged and purposeful. They developed improved and innovative responses to issues of safety for women and children and identified more ways to provide relevant information to men.

The arrangement served until, in 1999, the co-located Women's Shelter staff moved to new administration premises of their own. This was timely as, by then, NQDVRS had grown to eight workers in Townsville and extra space was needed for them, as well as for students on placement and any project or casual staff.

In that same year, the service secured a moderate amount of funding to set up a rural and remote domestic violence service to be based in Mount Isa, to extend services from the city to the Gulf and North West region. This service had previously been provided by the NQDVRS Coordinator who regularly travelled by car from Townsville to Mount Isa in order to visit the rural towns along the highway. The funding finally made it possible to employ a full-time worker, Shirley Slann, and set up an office, initially sharing space with the Family Court Service and later moving to the Neighbourhood Centre.

How it worked

The NQDVRS operational framework was established in line with the original funding requirements and further developed over the years.

Services

It included individual service delivery programs, such as:

- Crisis Counselling and Support – crisis counselling with a focus on prioritising the safety needs of women and children;
- Court Support Services – support and advocacy for victims of violence who were seeking a protection order, and pertinent information for perpetrators;

- Children’s Counselling and Support – in particular, the AARDVARC (Acknowledgement and Recognition of Domestic Violence and Real Change) witness program aiming to explore the experience of violence for the child/young person;
- Men’s Perpetrator Intervention Programs – group programs focusing on changing the abusive behaviour of men who have used violence in their relationships.

Pauline recalls: “In later years, in both Townsville and Mount Isa, a separate room was allocated for **men who were summoned to court for domestic violence matters**. Male workers from the men’s group work program interacted with each respondent, informing him of the requirements of the Protection Order and the benefits of consenting to the court order. **Over time, magistrates referred more respondents to the Men’s Behaviour Change program as part of the conditions of their order**, and progress and attendance were reported on. **This was a hard-won progression aimed at holding the man accountable for his use of violence.**”

Partnerships

Another key component of the service delivery framework was the development and maintenance of strong partnerships (*see* McLellan 2013). Two particularly innovative programs with this aim were:

- PAVE (Providers of Anti-violence Education) – a partnership between NQDVRS, NQCWS and Sera’s Women’s Shelter that enabled a collective response to all requests for community education and training across the region. This approach avoided duplication of services and resources and provided an opportunity to share the practice wisdom of all involved.
- Dovetail – an ‘integrated approach’ to domestic violence responses across relevant agencies in the

community (courts, police, health services, legal aid, corrections, veteran’s support, and so on). A key principle underlying Dovetail saw the onus for intervening shift from the victim to the community and agencies. The group developed joint protocols to promote a consistent response from all agencies involved. The name ‘Dovetail’ was considered appropriate as it was derived from a carpentry technique of joining wood for extra strength.

Education and training

Outreach, education and training have also been important elements of the service. One particular program of note has been the Perpetrator Education Program (PEP) – a group response to men who use violence and who want to change their behaviour. Based on the Duluth model (DAIP n.d.), a female facilitator and a male facilitator worked together to offer both education and practical tools to change the attitudes and behaviours that underpin the use of violence. The program was regularly delivered in the community and, on request, at the prison.

Community awareness

Raising community awareness has always been a primary focus of the service and Domestic Violence Prevention Month (DVPM) – initially Domestic Violence Prevention *Week*, but extended in 2004 – has provided an excellent opportunity for undertaking new and creative activities. Some notable examples were:

- A mock Domestic Violence Tribunal hearing – held in Townsville in 1998. This was an innovative way of focusing on the concept of domestic violence as a crime.

Pauline Woodbridge described the event:

“Looking back, it is unbelievable that we, as a medium-sized, grassroots feminist service, were able to take over the District Court (with permission) to hold a ‘**Tribunal on Violence against Women**’. We had a ‘Judge’ (Dr Betty McLellan); and representatives from a range of local agencies made up the ‘twelve strong and true members of the jury’. A group of 35 people, drawn from a range of key agencies and local organisations, were in the public seating area to hear testimony from women who had experienced violence from their male partners. Lots of support was given to the brave women who testified, and assistance with their story was provided at every step of the way. The stories were heart-breaking as one after another they revealed their pain and fear, along with examples of the ways the system had let them down. The jury was then asked to respond to what they had heard. There were questions and comments from the gallery, lots of tears and much heartfelt support for the women telling their stories. The Judge summed up all the responses and handed down her findings. It was a very successful and immediate way of raising awareness, although it had proved to be quite a difficult undertaking. That it happened at all is a testimony to the vision and hard work of the staff at NQDVRs.”

- Public signs and messages – part of the ‘Transporting the Message’ project beginning in 2007. There were signs about domestic violence wrapped around one of the buses in the Sunbus fleet; the NQDVRS logo and an appropriate anti-violence message on Townsville Taxi business cards; illuminated street signs with contact phone numbers for appropriate agencies; specially designed billboards; paid advertorials and, in 2008, a two-page insert in the *Townsville Bulletin*.

Pauline remembers taking the ‘wrapped’ bus:

“In May 2007, workers from NQDVRS, the Indigenous Family Violence Legal Outreach Unit, Tugulawa Women’s Aboriginal Corporation, and Sera’s Women’s Shelter boarded the bus for a trip to JCU where information and resources on domestic violence were distributed. It was a great way to raise awareness.”

- Community radio – Indigenous community radio station 4K1G featured prominently in events over the years. As well as regularly conducting radio interviews, they also broadcast from the NQDVRS offices during DVPM, encouraging workers, students, visitors and clients to share some aspect of their experience during the broadcast.

Student placements

Contributing to the development of the next generation of workers in the sector was also a key priority. NQDVRS worked cooperatively with JCU and other educational and training institutions to provide placement opportunities for many students.

In the 1998 Annual Report, just four years after the service began, it was noted that supervision had already been provided to sixteen JCU and TAFE students on placement. NQDVRS acquired a reputation as a responsible, supportive and safe place for students generally and, in particular, for those struggling with special circumstances of placement experiences.

Over the years, many social work and community welfare students from JCU, the local TAFE, other Australian universities, and Danish and American universities, as well as secondary school students, have benefited from placement experiences with NQDVRS.

The experiences offered to students on placement were many and varied. One interesting example was planning and conducting the annual Candlelight Vigil – an event supported jointly by NQDVRS, Sera’s Women’s Shelter and the Women’s

Centre. Using records of past events as a guide, each year the students: designed the program; invited the speakers; arranged for music, lighting, candles and sound equipment; set up for the event; and facilitated the evening. In recent years, the beautiful backyard area of the Women's Centre was the chosen location. For this occasion, men could be present (male police officers, government members, and representatives from other agencies participated).

This task was considered part of the students' placement experience and was supported by their JCU field placement coordinator. After the event, a final debriefing meeting was held, learnings were shared and a record of the process written up for use by the students of the following year.

Special event

A major event focusing on issues around domestic violence was held in Townsville in the early years of the service. This was a ground-breaking, two-day conference titled 'Confronting Domestic Violence: Developing Ideas for Change', spearheaded by NQDVRS and organised in conjunction with other community and women's services in 1995.

The aims of the conference were to raise awareness of the issues, to provide new and cutting-edge information to those working in the field, and to identify how gaps in services might be addressed.

The Conference Steering Group – Jody Bell, Betty McLellan, Madge Sceriha, Ann Lewis, Annette Thomas and Pauline Woodbridge – secured Ruth Busch, internationally renowned New Zealand lawyer and researcher, as a keynote speaker. Some key points from the conference program follow:

Day 1 was opened and chaired by Ginni Hall, Department of Social Work and Community Welfare at JCU, and featured speakers from the Family Court, the Magistrates Court and the Police Service, as well as Special Guest Speakers, Dr Betty McLellan and Dr Ruth Busch.

In the afternoon, a panel titled 'What is happening now?', chaired by JCU Professor Ros Thorpe, included service practitioners. Some key issues touched on were:

- the role that schools can play;
- the importance of listening to young people and their experiences of domestic violence;
- how the courts work;

- issues for those from diverse language backgrounds as well as those in rural and more isolated communities.

Panel presenters included:

Ines Zuchowski, NQDVRS

Angie Akee, Women's
Aboriginal Corporation

Greg Johannsen, District Registrar

Steve Donnelly, Police Prosecutor

Maria Suehrcke, Townsville
Multicultural Support Group

Brenda-Ann Norman,
community worker,
Burdekin Community
Association

"I remember that all the speakers were well prepared and very committed to the issues they were raising.

Topics discussed included hospital emergency wards as a first point of contact, the safety of police when serving protection orders, the need to challenge belief systems that accepted violent behaviour, and particularly **the need for agencies to work together in an integrated way in responding to domestic violence.**"

Madge

Day 2 was chaired by Jody Bell from the Townsville Women's Shelter. Special Guest Speaker, Ruth Busch, delivered the opening address, outlining the best-case scenario for an integrated model. She described the many ways current Family Law responses served to keep women and children in abusive relationships.

The program over the rest of the day highlighted a number of key issues and featured a range of speakers including:

- Professor Bronwyn Davies, Department of Education, James Cook University
- Joseph Parker, Queensland Legal Aid Office
- Heather Nancarrow, Queensland Department of Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs
- Sarah Challenor, Acting Director of Social Work, Townsville General Hospital
- Senior Sergeant Judy Newman, Queensland Police Service
- Donna Curro, Program Advisor, Townsville Correctional Centre
- Madge Sceriha, Counsellor/Activist, NQCWS.

Finally, as the conference concluded, Betty McLellan asked the conference members “Where to now?” and it became evident that there was great support for Townsville to develop an ‘integrated response’ to violence. This approach was named Dovetail (see section on Partnerships above for more details) and it became an important and continued focus for North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service operations.¹⁹

A new century

Over succeeding decades, NQDVRS continued to provide high-quality services, consolidated its sound professional reputation, forged new connections and took on some ground-breaking initiatives. These were busy, productive and exciting times.

The focus on working across agencies remained a priority and in 2001, Pauline, the Coordinator, and Madge Sceriha, from the Women’s Centre, were invited to Canberra to jointly present a paper at the ‘Australian Women Speak’ Conference. The conference was sponsored by the Office of the Status of Women, and their paper specifically looked at preventing violence through heightened community awareness and behaviour change.

By 2003, the service had once again expanded, with the office space in Townsville being doubled to accommodate additional workers employed with extra funding provided following the enactment of new domestic violence legislation. Staffing now numbered eleven. The Mount Isa office also moved to a larger space in the Court House and Police Station complex and, with the employment of an Indigenous worker for the Men’s Program in Mount Isa, numbers there increased to two. Between them, these two NQDVRS offices were responsible for the large region of North Queensland, extending from Bowen in the south, to Cardwell in the north, including Palm Island (Bwgcolman) to the east; out to Mount Isa, and through to the Northern Territory border, and down to Boulia in the west.

Another important development came in 2005. NQDVRS received federal funding to set up the Indigenous Family Violence Legal Outreach Unit (IFVLOU). A Coordinator, Isobel Jones, was appointed and staff members were selected. The services were to be co-located and this necessitated yet another move – this time to the 4th floor of Northtown on the Mall. The IFVLOU team shared premises with NQDVRS until they moved to accommodation of their own in 2010.

¹⁹ Papers from the conference were published in the report ‘Confronting domestic violence – developing ideas for change’, July 1995.

By 2012, escalating rents and tight budgets meant NQDVRS was itself facing yet another move – the third in eighteen years of operation. After a lengthy search, new office space was secured in the Metway Arcade: level 1 for services to women and children; and the mezzanine floor for the work with men who perpetrated violence. By this time, staffing numbered eighteen in the Townsville office while the Mount Isa office had grown to four.

In 2014 NQDVRS celebrated 20 years of service. An event held to celebrate this amazing achievement included the launch of the report ‘NQDVRS celebrating 20 Years 1994–2014’, prepared by Betty McLellan.

A change of government at state level meant that 2015 was a very busy year, with some additional funds made available and a number of new initiatives being undertaken. Funding was provided for a new position – a North Queensland Domestic Violence Sector Development worker – to support workers in Charters Towers, Palm Island, Ingham, Hughenden and the Burdekin.

Pioneering efforts in education and awareness-raising included a series of YouTube interviews conducted by Betty McLellan with the Coordinator, Pauline Woodbridge, on ‘Feminism, domestic violence and NQDVRS’. There was also exciting work being done with young people. Workers in the AARDVARC Children’s Program devised a ‘Healthy relationships’ course to be delivered over eight sessions to Year 12 students with special needs.

National and international platforms

Women’s Services workers from each state and territory initially came together in Melbourne in 1992 to address areas of common concern. They saw the need to organise at a national level and, with support from the Office of the Status of Women, WESNET (an incorporated national body) was formed in 1994 and continues to support women’s services to this day. Pauline Woodbridge was a member of this influential national group from its inception.

Pauline commented: “During the long period I was involved (from 1992 to 2018), WESNET was connected with many Commonwealth initiatives. One of these was the ‘Partnerships Against Domestic Violence’ (PADV) Steering Committee.²⁰ Over three years, PADV funded a wide range of research and reported on all aspects of domestic violence. It also included a meta-analysis of the collective learning gained over the life of the project. I particularly remember the broad range of

20 See <www.dpme.gov.au/osw/>

reports published that were so useful for our own community education programs. NQDVRS was responsible for the distribution of the resources around our region.”

Pauline went on to say: “In 2012, WESNET became the lead agency for Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA). AWAVA developed a resource time-line project²¹ to mark the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day in 2011. They also created the ‘Safety Net Australia Project’. Under this program, women’s services across Australia, including NQDVRS, received practical resources such as safe phones for women experiencing domestic violence that could be used without the perpetrator’s knowledge. The project included training around all forms of technological harms and safety strategies.”

Pauline served as Chair of WESNET for five years and in 2008 she represented WESNET as a member of the new National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children. The Council contributed to the National Plan – ‘Time for Action’. In 2009 the Plan was released by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, the Attorney General Robert McClelland, and the Minister for the Status of Women Tanya Plibersek. They agreed to immediately progress 18 of the 20 priority recommendations.²² The recommendations included an investment of \$3 million to support research on perpetrator treatment and nationally consistent laws. The NQDVRS Men’s Behaviour Change program was surveyed as part of the research.

After vacating the position of Chair, Pauline became the Older Women’s Representative for WESNET. The plight of older women was becoming more obvious and it was noted that violence, health issues, financial losses in divorce, and poverty, all contributed to increased risk of homelessness for this group.

Through WESNET, opportunities arose for NQDVRS to be more involved at the international level. In 2015, Pauline was a delegate at the 59th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York where she co-presented two sessions. One of these was with the Canadian Network of Women’s Shelters and Transition Houses, about the importance of National Plans, and the ways in which they could be used to hold governments to their goals. The other session considered the critical importance of women’s services being involved in perpetrator programs.

21 See <timeline.awava.org.au>

22 See <https://acquire.cqu.edu.au/articles/report/Time_for_action_The_National_Council_s_plan_for_Australia_to_reduce_violence_against_women_and_their_children_2009-2021/13465511?file=38177403>

Pauline was recognised in the **2006 Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Awards** and the **2007 Townsville Australia Day Achievement Awards**.

In 2015, she was awarded a **Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM)** for her service to women through social welfare and support organisations.

In 2017, Pauline was the recipient of an **Outstanding Alumni Award** from the College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University. This award recognised graduates of the University who had made an outstanding contribution in their field of endeavour at local, state, national or international levels.

In 2017, Pauline was again a delegate to the CSW in New York, attending two planning meetings for the Global Network of Women's Shelters²³ and co-presenting three workshop papers on issues and achievements that had been managed in the Townsville region. "I attended many other sessions hearing about inequality and violence against women in other countries and the efforts being made to protect women and children", she said. "I learned so much from this valuable international experience. To be among the women in a global arena was amazing and it was made possible by the support of the management and staff of NQDVRS as well as WESNET."



After 35 years in the Violence Against Women sector, 25 years nurturing NQDVRS – and turning 75 – Pauline retired in 2019.

Mandy Thompson took on the role of Coordinator of NQDVRS from 2019 to 2021. Verity Bennett took up the position in May 2021. The service continues to grow in response to the safety needs of women. In 2024, NQDVRS celebrated its 30th birthday, at which time it employed 41 staff, and was renamed 'DVNQ', with a new location, a redesigned logo and fresh branding.

23 See <<https://gnws.org/>>

**REFLECTIONS ...****Pauline Woodbridge reflects:**

This account of the beginnings and development of NQDVRS includes just some of the events and people involved. Much of it comes from recollections and ‘cherry picking’ examples outlined in a number of major reports²⁴ done over the life of the service. These reports outline the enormous amount of activity that occurred, not only in the local area, but also across North Queensland, greater Queensland and other parts of Australia. Learnings were taken from, and contributions made to, New Zealand, China, Canada, USA and India. Our feminist values guided us and supported us and we did make a difference.

The story of NQDVRS developed in a period of time when the Women’s Liberation Movement was demanding that something be done about men’s violence against women and that movement carried us all forward. In those early days, there was concern about what would happen to the sector if it accepted government funding, at the same time knowing that we needed funds to operate the services that women required. Although being accountable for the funding was not an issue, the heavy load of data collection, Quality Frameworks, and so on, changed the atmosphere and did impose a challenge. Nevertheless, we remained focused on doing what we knew needed doing and also meeting the requirements of our funding.

With continuing support, this important service, now known as DVNQ, will build on the past until the task is done, and women and children are safe in their homes and in our community.

24 The reports are: ‘North Queensland Domestic Violence Service 10-year report 1994–2004’; ‘North Queensland Domestic Violence Service – the first 15 years, June 1994–30 June 2009’; ‘Able and willing’, Chris Klease (2005); and ‘Partnerships in action’, Betty McLellan (2013) (used with permission). These reports are full of details of what happened, and why NQDVRS made such an impact. For a full account, go to these printed documents which are held at DVNQ.

Queensland Women's Health Network

Queensland Women's Health Network Inc (QWHN) was a statewide not-for-profit organisation created for women, by women. QWHN raised awareness of women's health issues using a social model of health and feminist analysis, and provided links between women involved in, or interested in, women's health. The voluntary management committee, and members, were located throughout Queensland to ensure coverage of regional issues.

Preliminary discussions about forming a Queensland women's health network commenced in 1986, following a National Community Health conference in Adelaide. Women worked hard visioning the network and produced the document 'Health needs of Queensland women'. As with many community-based agencies, there was a gap in the development of the group for a short period of time but enthusiasm was regenerated following the 1990 National Community Health Conference in Sydney. Women at the Brisbane Women's Health Centre undertook the project of establishing a statewide network. With no funding, visioning again occurred and progressed to the production of a newsletter, which enabled women to share their achievements and thoughts on the multitude of issues surrounding women's health in Queensland.



Left: Local QWHN members regularly supported women's activism in Townsville, including 'Reclaim the Night' marches

Right: Members of the 2017 QWHN Management Committee and Coordinator at a statewide meeting in Brisbane

In 1993, the Network was awarded a \$21,000 grant to enable the employment of a part-time worker to undertake the task of keeping Queensland women informed on health matters. Many activities took place in the years following the formalisation of the Network including:

- research projects;
- production of a newsletter (three editions per year);
- working with other community agencies to host forums;
- leading delegations representing women's issues to various government bodies;
- participation in public action campaigns;
- development of a website;
- regional women's health forums across the state.

Following the relocation of the office to Townsville in January 2003, the Network consolidated its core work and, through the development of a website, enhanced its ability to raise awareness of women's health issues and connect with women throughout the state. In 2013, a Facebook page became an integral virtual method of connecting with women, and in 2016 the website underwent an extensive upgrade to provide better access and functionality.

In 2009, the network developed a formal agreement with other funded women's health services across Queensland, becoming the Secretariat organisation for the Women's Health Services Alliance (WHSa). QWHN also continued its membership of the national peak organisation, the Australian Women's Health Network (AWHN), and in 2015 became a foundation member of the new state peak, Ending Violence Against Women Queensland (EVAWQ). In 2018, QWHN celebrated its



QWHN Newsletters covered a range of health topics and were distributed across Queensland

Coordinators/managers of four women's services at the joint AGM, and QWHN's 25th anniversary celebration, in 2018 (from left): Lindy Edwards, Sera's Women's Shelter; Pauline Woodbridge, North Queensland Domestic Violence Resource Service (DVNQ); Maree Hawken, Queensland Women's Health Network; Cathy Crawford, North Queensland Combined Women's Services (The Women's Centre)



25th anniversary as a funded organisation, and in 2019 a new logo was designed to reflect the goals of the organisation (QWHN 2021).

QWHN received funding from the Queensland Government for more than 27 years until 30 June 2022. Due to changes in the government's investment priorities, the funding contract was not renewed, and the organisation could no longer operate. However, QWHN outlasted the other statewide women's health networks that had existed across Australia in the 1980s and 1990s (Jamieson 2012, p. 145). This was made possible by the extraordinary vision, strength and determination of feminists in the women's health movement, and all the women who generously gave their time and expertise over the years.

REFLECTIONS ...

Dr Betty McLellan, former Network Chairperson (2000–2022), recalls:

Reflecting on my time as Chairperson of the Queensland Women's Health Network, I'm thankful for the opportunity it afforded me to focus on the physical and mental health needs of women and to contribute in some small way to improving what was, and continues to be, a dire situation for many women.

While capital cities and other highly populated areas are reasonably well serviced, our greatest concern was for women living in rural, regional and remote parts of the state, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Two things stand out for me as I reflect on our work, both of which warrant special mention: One is the high-quality newsletter we produced three times each year and distributed to women and women's organisations around the state. The other is our establishment of a First Nations Women's Health Advisor position (voluntary), recommended by Committee Member, Aunty Peggy Tidyman.

I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to work with the Coordinator of the Network, Maree Hawken, as well as the other members of the committee. As a team, we were all strongly committed to a feminist analysis of women's health and improving the health of women and girls throughout the state.

Maree Hawken, former Coordinator of the Network (2006–2022), reflects:

Working for QWHN opened my eyes to the numerous women, not-for-profit women's organisations, and networks, that operate locally and throughout Queensland (and Australia). Here were dedicated volunteers and professionals applying a feminist lens to make a positive difference in women's lives, particularly those impacted by racism, disability, men's violence, economic hardship, and mental health issues.

It also gave me the opportunity to travel across the state, from the Torres Strait to Woorabinda and Brisbane and many places in between, to see firsthand the unique health challenges faced by communities, as well as women's resilience and innovative place-based solutions.

It was an honour to work with Dr Betty McLellan and the committee members, as well as the broader women's health sector.



Women's services in Townsville have evolved and expanded significantly over the decades.

Sera's Women's Shelter went from operating out of an 'old Queenslander' with 3 or 4 workers, to an organisation that, by 2025, managed 15 places of safe shelter and employed 18 staff. Similarly, the Women's Centre's initial complement of 3 workers grew to more than 40 in their new purpose-built, world-class

accommodation. DVNQ (formerly NQDVRS) also acquired large, well-designed new premises and grew from the original 4 workers to 49 in 2025.

North Queensland Women's Legal Service, originally a small, grassroots initiative, grew to become a large concern with 39 workers, while its former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Unit became an entity in its own right as the First Nations Women's Legal Services Qld Inc, employing 17 staff, including 7 solicitors, by 2025.

Across the services, many tens of thousands of women have found help, support and safety over these past decades. As important as this is, not all achievements can be reduced to facts and figures, and the value of qualitative measures of success should not be underestimated. Over the years these agencies, and the other smaller services outlined above, have:

- earned a reputation for professionalism and high-quality service that fosters community respect and support;
- raised the level of community awareness of the serious issues they confront on a daily basis;
- had significant input into developing legislation, government policy and academic understanding;
- demonstrated that it is possible to work from a model that values collective, rather than hierarchical, management approaches; and
- consistently placed women, and women's perspectives, at the centre of their practice.

By these measures, women's services in Townsville rate as highly effective organisations offering North Queensland women important services that, over the decades, have contributed to changing the fabric of society.



CONCLUSION

THE culture, work, philosophy and achievements described in *Collective memories: feminism in Townsville 1975–2025* tell the story of a momentous time in Townsville's history. Often the work of women is lost and devalued. Certainly, little recognition is given to the grassroots feminist activism that is so evident in this feminist 'herstory' of Townsville. This book captures the energy of women working for women – a testimony to our passion, commitment and persistence. A regional city like Townsville may have seemed an unlikely place to nurture such radical feminist visions; nevertheless the chapters in *Collective memories* have revealed a deep feminist engagement across the community, leading to extraordinary outcomes. Feminist agendas and activism came from individual women, community groups, unions, academics, artists, professionals and business owners. Their goal was to confront patriarchy and make a better world.

So much that we take for granted in Townville today (2025) would not have been possible without the passion and work of the women whose stories are told in this book. In Townsville one can buy feminist books at a local bookshop, study and research women's lives at a local university, use women-centred welfare services, and come together with other feminist women, locally and globally. For us, and we hope for you the reader, this was a story worth telling. *Collective memories* provides a sense of what this feminist work was like – the difficulties and the wins. None of us assumes there is a full stop to this activism – this is not the end.

Telling these stories was a radical feminist act. As authors we decided not to be silent, not to let important feminist work disappear. We want future generations of women to know that women have struggled and have succeeded, and that change is possible. We've done it before, and we can do it again – here is the proof!

To listen to **in-depth interviews** with some of Townsville's leading feminists, search for our **PODCASTS** at Townsville Citylibraries.

Appendices

A Those Who Came Before

While this historical account deals with the period from 1975 to 2025, we also want to acknowledge and pay tribute to those women who came before – those who led the way and inspired others.

While many of these 'pioneers' continued to be involved in women's activities into the following decades, and are featured in some of the preceding chapters, their earlier endeavours were pivotal to what followed.

Here are some of the Townsville women whose work in the 1960s and 1970s had an impact for women and for the emerging Women's Liberation Movement. They helped pave the way ...

Iris Clay (1936–1979). Iris was an Indigenous leader and activist who fought for equality for the people of Palm Island (Bwgcolman). She worked for the Aboriginal Legal Service on Palm Island, and was a founding member, as well as Director, of Aboriginal Hostels Limited. 'Iris Clay' Hostel in Townsville was named after her, and Clay Street in the suburb of Bonner in the Australian Capital Territory was named in honour of both her and her husband, Fred Clay, in 2009.

Source: Based on Aboriginal Hostels Limited (n.d.); AIATSIS (n.d.)

Townsville in the 1960s and early 1970s was different in many ways from the city that emerged into the 21st century.

The population of around **50,000 in 1960** had swelled to **86,000 by 1996** and had exceeded **200,000 in 2025**.

Source: Based on Council of the City of Townsville 1964; OESR 2002; Townsville City Council n.d.

Dorothy Cole (1929–2010). Dot and her family came to Townsville in 1971 when she established her general practice in Belgian Gardens. She was committed to social justice and helped to establish Townsville's first women's shelter, rape crisis service and family planning clinic. In 2005, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Letters for outstanding service to the North Queensland community.

Source: Based on JCU (8 May 2022); personal knowledge

Susie Dickson (1915–1992). After arriving in Australia from the United Kingdom in 1957, Susie came to Townsville and was quickly involved in union and political activities. She became Chair of the Local Government Women’s Association (LGWA), worked for the Prisoners Aid Society and undertook an oral history project for Margaret Reynolds’ office, which focused on women who had been involved in the labour movement in North Queensland. Susie was also the first female juror in Townsville in the 1960s.

Source: Based on Collie (1991)

Shirley Gilliver (1935–1991). Former journalist and Radio 4TO announcer, Shirley worked in media in the 1970s where she promoted local women’s issues and interests before becoming a senior tutor in the Department of Social Work at James Cook University. She was a mayoral candidate for Townsville in 1989.

Source: Based on Townsville City Council (n.d.)

Gwen Gorman (1932–2024). Gwen was one of the first social workers in Townsville in the early 1970s and became heavily involved in issues around social justice for women particularly in the areas of income support, housing and welfare services. She assisted with securing government funding for a number of much needed services for women.

Source: Based on personal knowledge

In those earlier years, events unfolded that would have a major and lasting impact on the city:

- **The University College of Townsville** was established in Pimlico in 1961, becoming an independent entity – James Cook University – and relocating to Douglas in 1970.
- **Television** arrived in 1962 with local channel TNQ 7 being the first broadcaster, closely followed by the ABC.
- A large army base – **Lavarack Barracks** – was established in Murray, at the base of Mount Stuart, in 1967.
- **The Townsville Arts Centre Association** was formed in the late 1960s with the aim of renovating the existing Arts Centre and supporting the small but vibrant local arts scene.
- **Cyclone Althea** wreaked havoc on large parts of the city and its infrastructure on Christmas Eve 1971.

Source: Based on Townsville City Council (n.d.); personal knowledge

Jacqueline Hering (1929–2016). Jacqui, who hailed from Canada, lectured in community welfare when the course was first established in the 1970s at the Townsville College of Advanced Education. She was also involved in many of the women’s activities and groups that were emerging at the time.

Source: Based on personal knowledge

Joan Hopkins (1909–1990). Joan was a science teacher at the Cathedral School (formerly St Anne’s Church of England Girls’ School) for sixteen years. In recognition of Joan’s commitment to science education, in 1998 the school named their

new science laboratories in her honour. She was recognised with a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for her community services and educational activities. In addition, Joan played a key role in the establishment of the Townsville Day Nursery in 1947 – the first child care facility in Townsville.

Source: Based on St Margaret’s (n.d.)

Local events played out against a changing national backdrop. For example:

- Over 90% of Australians voted ‘Yes’ in the **1967 Referendum** “to determine whether two references in the Australian Constitution, which discriminated against Aboriginal people, should be removed” (NAA 2023).
- Germaine Greer’s *The female eunuch* was published in 1970.
- Australia became involved in the **Vietnam War** and conscription was in force from 1965 to 1972 (Source: Based on NAA 2023).
- Gough Whitlam’s reformist **Labor Government** came to power in 1972, ushering in a growing social awareness of the rights of women and other marginalised groups.

Joan Innes Reid (1915–2001). Joan came to Townsville in 1954. She was the first social worker in town and serviced not only Townsville but also Cairns and the regional communities of North Queensland. In 1967 Joan entered politics becoming the first woman to be elected to the Townsville City Council and, in 1973, the city’s first woman deputy mayor. Joan received the Order of Australia in 1983 for her service to the community, particularly in the fields of local government, social welfare and culture.

Source: Based on Townsville City Council (n.d.)

Margaret Reynolds (1941–). Arriving in Townsville in 1965, Margaret was involved in education, with a special interest in Indigenous issues. At the same

time, she became involved in feminist and peace issues. She established a branch of the anti-conscription women's organisation 'Save Our Sons' in 1966 and was a founding member of the local Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) established in 1972. Margaret was elected to the Townsville City Council in 1979 and served for four years before becoming a Federal Labor Senator representing Queensland, a role she filled until 1999.

Source: Based on Sullivan (2017); WILPF (2020)

Ann Roberts (1923–2002). Ann was born and grew up in Townsville. She was involved in the performing arts throughout her life and was one of the founders of the North Queensland Ballet Company (later 'Dance North') receiving a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for services to the arts in 1985.

Source: Based on Performing Arts Historical Society Townsville (n.d.)

Evelyn Scott (1935–2017). Evelyn was an Indigenous social activist and educator. She began working in the Townsville Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advancement League in the 1960s and was actively involved in campaigning for the 1967 Constitutional Referendum. She was also a member of the first Steering Committee of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Service (TAIHS) in 1974. She was awarded an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 2003.

Source: Based on Reconciliation Australia (2017)

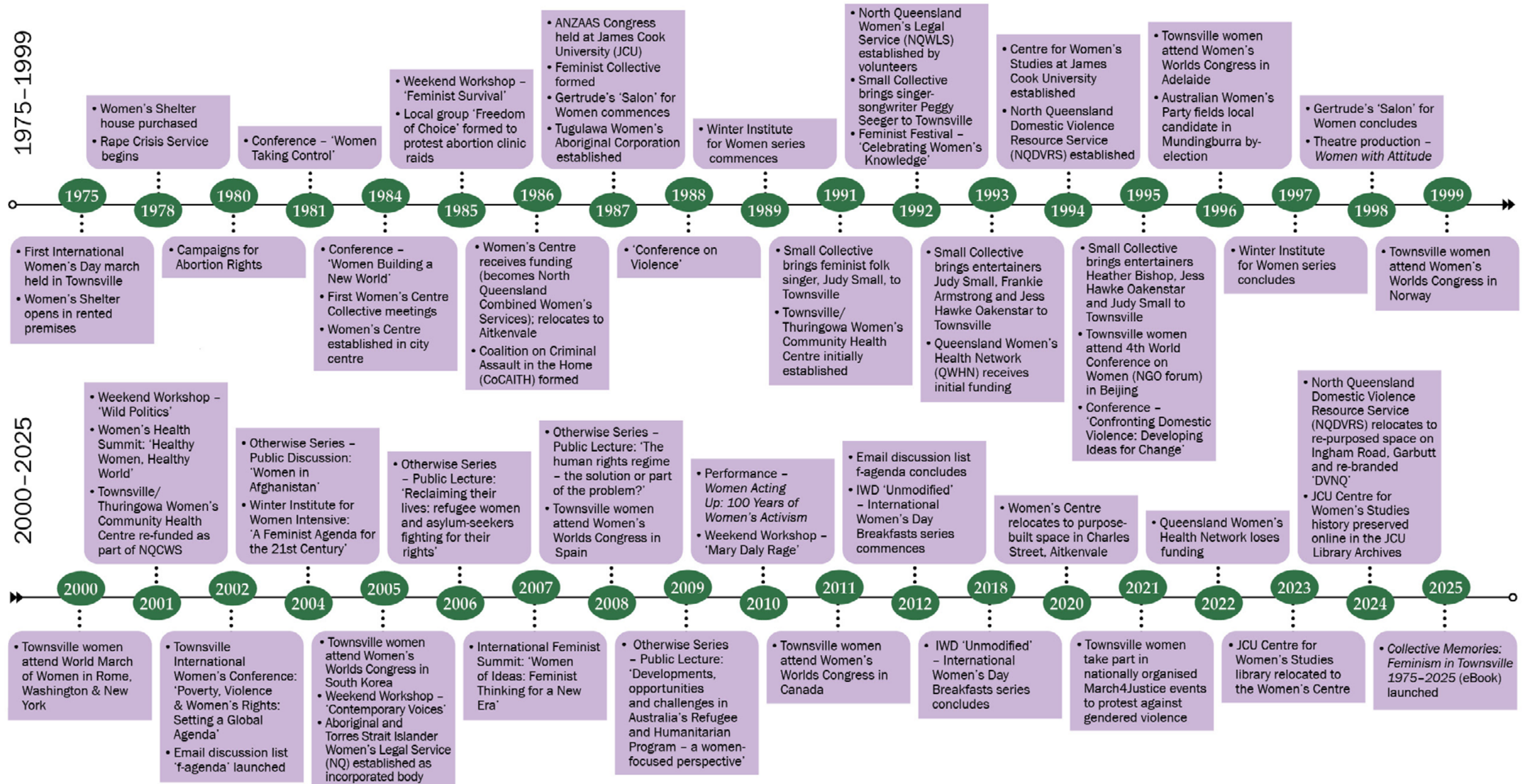
Anneke Silver (1937–). Anneke came to Townsville from the Netherlands in 1961 and made her mark in the fine arts arena, gaining a prominent reputation nationally. She lectured at James Cook University and was also involved in many community art endeavours. Her art pieces in the series *Images of the Goddess* were particularly sought after and were later the subject of a book (see Magon 1995).

Source: Based on Life Out Loud Storytelling (2022)

June Tonnoir (1928–2021). From the 1960s, June was a strong advocate for women's rights in Townsville – writing letters to the editor, lobbying politicians and participating in Women's Liberation events and marches. A gallery and antiquarian bookshop owner (with a feminist book section), June was also involved in activist work, focused on making women's voices heard in advocacy for the establishment of James Cook University, and the development of Townsville's arts and literary community. She also took a leadership role in the 1980 pro-abortion campaign.

Source: Based on personal knowledge

B Timeline



About the Authors

Nonie Harris

Nonie, a long-time member of the Feminist Collective, grew up in Townsville, having arrived here at the tender age of six weeks. She was very much influenced by her mother's early involvement in women's issues and became a strong activist in her own right, in the community, in women's services and through her highly regarded work with the Centre for Women's Studies at James Cook University.

Maree Hawken

Born and raised in Townsville, Maree has long had a keen interest in feminism, particularly feminist theory and literature. She has been part of the Townsville Feminist Collective for many years, taking on an invaluable secretariat role for the group. Maree's editing skills and professional experience have been essential to the production of our eBook.

Coralie McLean

Coralie is another native Townsvillian, who is pleased to call this northern city home. She has been part of the Feminist Collective since its beginnings and has been involved in developing and supporting a range of local feminist projects and initiatives over many years. She has an ongoing interest in recording and preserving women's herstory.

Betty McLellan

Recognised as one of the leading feminist activists in Townsville over more than four decades, Betty has been tireless in her advocacy for women, both in her professional life and her community involvements. She is the author of six books with a feminist focus (one of which

has been translated into sixteen languages). She is also a foundation member of the Townsville Feminist Collective.

Chantal Oxenham

Chantal has been a long-time member of the Feminist Collective and brings a sharp intellect and a passionate feminist commitment to the group discussions and activities. Over the years, she has been involved in planning, organising and delivering a number of high-profile women's conferences, forums and presentations in the city – including several with international participation.

Judith Threlfall

Judith was born and grew up in the Townsville/Burdekin region, the daughter of a strong, independent and creative mother who fostered her interest in social justice issues, particularly with respect to women. Travelling between the United Kingdom and Townsville on a regular basis over recent years, she has been well positioned to bring an important international perspective to Feminist Collective discussions.

Pauline Woodbridge

Based in Townsville since the 1970s, Pauline has made her mark in the women's services arena. In particular, she has built a strong and enviable reputation for her extensive work in the area of domestic violence prevention at local, state and national levels – including representation of the issues at a number of United Nations forums in New York. In recognition of her outstanding service to women, she was awarded a Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2015.

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By preserving our feminist herstory

'Collective Memories'

*encourages current and future generations of women
to keep confronting patriarchy and creating a better world*

**THE
WRITERS**

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