

Transcript of ABC Radio North West program, Feminism in Karratha, 1 February 2001, with Kate Sieper

Kate: Estelle was our Heywire winner, which is a program to give regional youth a voice. And Estelle's piece was on Feminism in Karratha. Here it is...

(Replay of Heywire Radio National entry from c. October 2000, as follows:)

Heywire, the voice of regional youth. The voice of Estelle Cleaver-Wilkinson, Karratha, Western Australia.

Song excerpt: *I am woman, hear me roar, in numbers too big to ignore...*

Hear me roar? For God's sakes, we're in the Pilbara. To hear a woman roar round here, she's barracking for the Karratha Kats, probably half pissed.

For I'm still an embryo, with a long, long way to go...

Embryo? We're nowhere near fertilised egg stage up here.

Until I make my brother understand...

Few males even know "n-o," spells 'No'.

Yes, I am wise, but it's wisdom born of pain...

Maybe Tim Costello was right, maybe this is the wife-bashing capital of the world.

Yes, I paid the price, but look how much I gained...

A labourer, having passed year 10, makes a hundred grand a year at the local gas plant, whilst women with university degrees are serving him pints of beer by night.

If I have to, I can face anything...

Well, that's become apparent.

I am woman...

Feminism in the Pilbara – now there's a contradiction in terms. Traditionally, the home of the woman's domain. But in Karratha, even that is determined by the company her husband works for. Stereotypical gender roles have returned. The question is, did they ever leave this region? The men do long shifts, spend hours in a company-owned pub, and do fishing on the weekends. Their wives do coffee in the morning, housework during the day, and collect the children after school. To stand back and observe is like watching reruns of 'All in the Family'.

And just look at the local rag. You've got firemen and garbage collectors on the front page, sportsmen on the back, and the cultural highlight of the year? The Dampier Sharks, dressing in drag for their football review night.

I will survive...

Now picture a typical barbecue in Karratha. Women standing by an insipid anchovyless caesar salad with Praise dressing, talking about the latest Ricki Lake controversy, while the men, accompanied by their eskies, and mandatory bottomless stubby holders, affectionately termed Pilbara Cuffs, talk about the fish they killed, the Kats' back-to-back premierships, or how the Abos get given too much.

In truth, my generation's been an embarrassment to my mother's. Instead of burning bras, we've fallen over our wonderbra.

I am woman...

(end of recording)

Kate: (sighs) Estelle Cleaver-Wilkinson's Heywire entry there, she was our north west winner. And joining me now in the studio is Estelle, who has actually moved to Melbourne, but is back in Karratha this week, and Kathy Barrett-Lennard, from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and also a member of the Pilbara Business & Professional Women's group. They are here to discuss feminism in the Pilbara, and we'd also like to hear from you on the issue, so give us a call on 1800 195 510. Are we, the women of the north west, the equals of our men?

Now Estelle, you're quite harsh in your assessment of the life of women in Karratha, do you still stand by what you said in Heywire?

Estelle: I believe Karratha, like every other town, has its problems. I don't think there's anyone in town who would disagree this is predominately a boys' town, with all the big companies and the majority of men outnumbering the women here. I think feminism, or the lack thereof, is a problem, not so much for my mother's generation, but more so for my age generation, and that's not just here, I see that in the city as well, I don't think girls my age and parents today realise the problems of the glass ceiling when it comes to employment and promotions and I don't think they really appreciate equal pay. That's my biggest concern.

Kate: Kathy, what did you think of Estelle's piece?

Kathy: I thought it was, as you suggested, fairly harsh, but it was interesting and well put together and I commend Estelle for expressing her opinion in such a creative way. But I felt, personally and professionally, that it is unfortunate if it really did reflect her own experience.

Kate: It's a piece that has had national exposure and will continue to do so for some time. Do you think women will think twice, on hearing that, about moving to Karratha?

Estelle: I don't think so. I think if you're a feminist and you come into this town, you can make the best of it. I mean, as I pointed out to some people already, I've had, in this town in the last 4 years, some great role models, and I've made a few notes here, just so people don't get too offended, the Nan Williams, Judy Wrights, Judie Pettitts, Glen Slees, yourselves, people that I've had to deal with in the last couple of years who I think have done really well. But I also agree that you can do that anywhere, it doesn't really matter what town you're in, it's just a bit harder to do here.

Kate: Estelle, do you think there's a chance that those women who are working on their anchovyless salads with Praise dressing and standing by their men, may actually not be ashamed of what they do, are quite proud of the role they fulfill in their lives up here, and enjoy it, even?

Estelle: Oh, if they do, good luck to them.

Kate: Kathy, does it concern you that this macho image of Karratha is getting national exposure?

Kathy: Well, I think it's an honest opinion well expressed. Unfortunately it could perhaps lead some people to the impression that it's more one-sided than I would suggest it really is. The local group or community is not entirely made up of those people - not that those people don't have a place in any town or centre, as Estelle has pointed out. There is an element of many of the things that she's touched upon, in this community as in others.

But I think it would be unfortunate for us if people elsewhere in Australia gained the impression that it is representative of the whole community.

Kate: Estelle, there wasn't much of an offering to any other vision there. Estelle's pretty clear cut that that is the life of women here. What else do you think the Pilbara offers women, Kathy, aside from that vision?

Kathy: From my perspective as a person who is involved with BPW, which is a group of very motivated individuals, who happen to be women, there are also members of a very active Soroptomists group in town, that, particularly with my involvement with business and small business, I see a different side of the community, and the professional or business community in particular, which I think is very positive. Coming back to your question, there is a great deal of opportunity, not just for women, but for people here, who are motivated, who are skilled, and who wish to go out and pursue a career. There is certainly that aspect Estelle has mentioned of the glass ceiling and there are some very traditional role models. There's no denying that, but there is very very good support, there's great networking and a great deal of positive activity and enthusiasm in the area.

Kate: You're listening to ABC Radio, Estelle Cleaver-Wilkinson, our Heywire winner, and Kathy Barrett-Lennard. We're talking about feminism in the Pilbara. If you'd like to make a comment, give us a call on 1800 195 510. Estelle, do you see any answers to some of the issues you brought up in your Heywire piece, such as the company house being in the man's name and the wage disparity?

Estelle: I don't know if I actually have any solutions, I suppose it is a great concern. Probably one of my other ones that actually was only just brought to my attention since I arrived back in Karratha last night, was the fact that I've just been offered a job in Melbourne, and I haven't yet graduated from uni, I'm not getting a huge wage, but I've just found out there's two women in this community who have a pretty high standing, pretty high positions, both with two degrees, and they're getting paid less than I am, and that concerns me greatly, and I'm wondering why, because if they were in the city, they'd be getting paid a lot more.

Kate: Do you think that it's because they're women, though? Or is it something to do with their jobs?

Estelle: I do. I think it might be because they're women. I see a lot of highly paid men in this community.

Kathy: It could also possibly reflect the fact that it may be a lifestyle choice that they've made, to be here. You mentioned that they're more qualified than yourself at this stage - perhaps they've made the choice to be here at a lower personal return to themselves for other benefits of living in this area. Do you think that's a possibility?

Estelle: Well, I don't know, they'd probably both like more money. I know that one requested more, and lost her job.

Kate: Do you think that's something to do not just with being a women, but with being in the Pilbara? Do you think that's an attitude that is somehow more entrenched here than elsewhere?

Estelle: I don't know. I feel that there's a difference with my job in Melbourne than in the Pilbara. I suppose it concerns me because I don't know any men who have such high positions in the community, who get paid such a pitiful wage. It could be true for instance but that's the situation.

Kate: We have a caller on the line, in fact I think she's one of the inspirational women you mentioned earlier - Judy, from Karratha. Judy, good afternoon. Now, you've been in Karratha for many years?

Judy Wright: I've been in Karratha 17 years actually.

Kate: You've seen women in the Pilbara and their standing. Has it changed much in that time?

Judy: In 17 years I've seen a hell of a lot of change. Actually with Estelle, I wasn't sure if she was trying to be Billy Connolly or Tim Costello when she said that. I thought it was tongue in cheek. But I was sorry to hear life in Karratha wasn't what she dreamed or wished for. Some of the comments were a bit close to the bone. Maybe it's a good reminder that things in this town as in other towns are not perfect. However in my experience there are lots of strong and successful women who lead positive lives, and they have also got positive and fulfilling relationships, as in my own, I'm 25 years married this year. Many of my friends not only love their lives but excel in Karratha and quite a lot of them are very successful businesswomen. I have a daughter that's only two years older than what Estelle is herself, and she is running and owns a very successful business, so I find she's had a really good run.

Kate: Do you think it's harder for women to be successful in Karratha or the Pilbara than they would have found elsewhere?

Judy: No, actually I think it's better for them in the Pilbara.

Kate: Really, why's that?

Judy: Well, there are more opportunities. There are more women's things to do here. When I first came up here, we had one store, a Farmer's store, and that was it, there was nothing else here. Now all of a sudden we've got every opportunity a woman could want, every government department, everything that we need for our children to grow and prosper and get looked after, we've got the education, they grow up here, they love it here. They don't want to leave.

Kate: Estelle, do you want to respond to that at all?

Estelle: Actually I agree with Judy, in that I mean I love Karratha, I came here uncertain what it was I wanted to do. I was working in the hospitality industry in Melbourne, and didn't quite know what I wanted to do, I came up here and decided journalism was what I wanted to do. Karratha and its community gave me a lot of direction, probably unconsciously, and gave me an opportunity of getting to work at the paper, giving me the strength and the courage to do that, however I don't know far I could have got in the community. I don't know how many opportunities there are for me.

Kate: Do you think you succeeded because you had to fight a bit more.

Estelle: Maybe.

Kate: We might leave it there. A last comment from you, Kathy, in response?

Kathy: I felt that was a very interesting comment from Judy. It's great to hear a positive response like that, because that attitude is out there in the community, and I would agree with Judy's point in particular that if individuals are motivated there is a great opportunity in small business in this area. And I think that success can much more dependent in a smaller centre such as our own on networking and the relationships that people create, establish, maintain and nurture.

Kate: In a predominantly male town like this, is it harder for women to create those networks?

Kathy: I don't think so. I think if women really utilise the contacts that they can establish, and as I said before, there are very good professional support groups here who can assist them to do so, then their networking circles can be as wide as they would like.

Kate: Thank you very much for joining the program. Thank you, Judy, thank you also to Estelle Cleaver-Wilkinson, our 2000 Heywire winner and topic provider, and also to Kathy Barrett-Lennard from the Chamber of Commerce & Industry and the Business and Professional Women's Group in Karratha.

You're listening to Kate Sieper on your local ABC. Just to finish that off, we'll play Estelle's piece once again. (Replay)

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