

WOMEN'S INFORMATION SERVICE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Transcript of Interview with Carol Treloar

Interviewee: Carol Treloar

Interviewer: Kati Murphy

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[00:00:01]

MURPHY: This is an interview with Carol Treloar by Kati Murphy on the 15th August, 2017 at the State Library of South Australia. Also present is Ruth Munro. It is a part of the Oral History Project for the Women's Information Service.

MURPHY: Welcome Carol.

TRELOAR: Thank you Kati. Thank you Ruth.

MURPHY: We'd like to start off with some general background information about yourself. Would you tell us when and where you were born?

TRELOAR: I was born in December 1950, in Sydney. My parents were young. Neither of them had gone to University. Dad was working in business and my mother had gone to secretarial school, so I grew up in a kind of classic 1950's, 1960's suburban Sydney.

MURPHY: And whereabouts in Sydney did you grow up?

TRELOAR: I grew up in a suburb called East Killara, which is on the north side of the Harbour. I went to school at Pymble, to an all-girls school, which I think, while it was very conservative and in some ways punitive, it made for strong character building. So after school ---, and I also learnt to love music and the arts and reading.

MURPHY: And you learnt all this at, is it Pymble College?

TRELOAR: Yes, yes I did.

MURPHY: Okay.

TRELOAR: I then went to Sydney University and hit University in 1969, having not any real idea about what my career would be, or what I wanted to do. In those days there was very little career counselling for girls and if your family had professionals in it, you seemed to end up with a lot more knowledge about what was possible and what to do. So I enrolled for a general Arts Degree at Sydney Uni., ended up majoring in Psychology and English with an Honours Degree and then I taught at Sydney University in the English Department for three years as a tutor, or as a Teaching Fellow and was enrolled in doing my Master's Degree.

MURPHY: Wonderful!

[00:02:16]

TRELOAR: That was an amazing year to hit University because it was the time when the Women's Movement was just getting going. There was a lot of radicalization around the Vietnam War, even in those days the Environment Movement. I was really impressed by poets like Judith Wright, who had become an environmental activist in her older years, too.

MURPHY: So, can I ask you, I mean, you had this wonderful time at University and you ended up working at University as well. So how did your studies, some of the things that you studied, start shaping your views?

TRELOAR: Oh, Okay. Well I was reading writers like George Eliot and her fabulous book "Middlemarch" and her great heroine, Dorothea. I came across a whole lot of other writers, like Simone de Beauvoir. In those early years. Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique" had just been published. I had a friend called Kate Jennings who was a writer and very vocal feminist advocate and I came across people like Anne Summers and Pat O'Shane and lots of women like that. So yes, it was a process of meeting a lot of different women, getting involved in some of those groups, reading a lot and becoming very aware that there were injustices that women faced right across the social spectrum.

MURPHY: And, did these experiences at University with the injustices you felt across the spectrum, ultimately it helped shape your career?

TRELOAR: Oh, absolutely!

MURPHY: Was that a major factor in you having the career that you did?

TRELOAR: It was Kati. I lived in Glebe for a few years and in the street just behind me, the first Women's Shelter in Australia was set up. It was called Elsie. It had been set up by Anne Summers and Kris Melmouth and a lot of other local women. So it was on my doorstep in fact, the issue of women being subjected to domestic violence, to abuse in the home and they were women from all strata of society. That's remained a huge issue for women.

MURPHY: It has.

TRELOAR: And we worked on it in the Women's Office. Obviously, with Rosie Batty's work and ongoing work from the refuges, women have found information through services like WIS (Women's Information Service), about where to go, what their options are, how to manage it. I have to say that that problem will be with us for a long time to come, but some inroads have been made.

MURPHY: Well, talking about your career, if we could move on a little bit more about your career. We know that you were the Women's Adviser to the Premier from 1984 to 1990, could you tell us a little bit about your role, what your actual role was as Women's Adviser to the Premier?

[00:05:42]

TRELOAR: Well, I came to South Australia, came back to South Australia, to take up the job as John Bannon's Women's Adviser and I was, I guess, very aware of all the various ways that women had been oppressed or alienated or marginalized in society and I was particularly keen to open up economic opportunities and see recognition across government and in business about the potential of the contribution that women could make, if the barriers against them were removed or reduced. I was equally passionate about women in education, women's health, which I think has improved a lot since those days, but there was a strong movement of Women's Community Health Centres and a lot needed to be done there. Women in education, I think I mentioned. Women going back into the

Workforce after having had families. That's still not easy, but it was almost impossible in those days. There were barriers against women with families, with children. They were not encouraged and it was a great loss to our society and a lot of women really wanted to go back to work. They wanted to care for their children as well obviously and it's never been an either/or situation. The woman at home and the woman at work are just usually the same woman at different times of her life.

MURPHY: And, so you mentioned these were the important issues for women at the time. What do you think was the important issues in the community as well, when you were the Women's Adviser to the Premier?

[00:07:35]

TRELOAR: I definitely think the whole area of family law was a real issue and domestic violence, I'd have to say, was probably one of the biggest issues. I think the others were, you know, women had no support in terms of going, if they had to go to court for family law or any other reason they had no idea what to do, who to go to, so I think the Women's Information Switchboard was really a support service, not just an information service. Someone from Switchboard would go to Court with a woman to make sure she was okay, accompany them. So there was a lot of support given as well as information. And in those days, I mean, we just didn't have the technical or technological sources of information that we have now. A woman at home in the suburbs just wouldn't know who to turn to. There was a Citizens' Advice Bureau, and I remember a great woman whose first name was Mary and I can't recall her surname, it might come to me. She was on the Management Committee of WIS (Women's Information Switchboard), and that was a fantastic link to be made in terms of accessing broader information and also letting services like that know that women had very particular needs in health, in escaping violence, in finding new educational opportunities, retraining to go back into work.

MURPHY: They were very important issues then. As you said earlier we are still grappling with some of those issues today.

TRELOAR: We are, we certainly are.

MURPHY: In a different way?

TRELOAR: That's right.

MURPHY: But we are still grappling with those issues today.

TRELOAR: Yeah.

[00:09:24]

MURPHY: How did your role, when you were the Women's Adviser to the Premier impact women and the Women's Movement at the time, so in other words, did your role make an impact?

TRELOAR: Well, I think, I think it did. In a state like South Australia, it's a smaller population and that made it a lot easier to work directly with a lot of different women. I worked with the Country Women's Association, with the Women's Agricultural Bureau, with women from the churches, with the YWCA, women in prison activist groups, women in sport and we really were able to be out there consulting and finding out what those issues were and then moving into government to see how do you make change, how do you develop policies that reflect these needs and these priorities for women. And that was an area where I really felt able to make a difference - I felt I understood how the government worked, how government in general worked and in those days the Women's Adviser's office was directly in the Premier's Department. I met regularly, probably fortnightly with John Bannon. I would always prepare a paper on something to talk about, or have various briefings and sometimes our meetings, he would say or I would say, why don't we go out, go down to Switchboard, and make that our meeting. He'd say, so I could meet some of the staff down there, some of the volunteers, see what they are doing, so he was really interested in that side of the Office's work as well. And we were able to have access to all the submissions to Cabinet, that each individual Minister made and we were able to make comments on them or say that you've neglected to deal with a very important issue about women in transport, for example.

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That actually reminds me of another major project we set up, I don't think it has continued, but it was called the Women's Budget Program and we, through Treasury, every year for several years, created a document where each department had to analyse the impact of their programs and their new initiatives on women, so it made, in the sense brought women's interests into the mainstream of government planning. So that, for example, if a new suburban development was going ahead, the planners would have to think about, well what are the needs of women? They might be quite different to those of men. Women will need transport to local shops. It is not just people with disabilities that need access to footpaths and roadways, its women with prams and a lot of those issues just hadn't occurred to local governments and to planners. So this women's budget exercise was really, really important in changing the thinking within those departments. I don't know whether there is anything comparable to that happening now, but it was certainly quite, very progressive.

The Commonwealth Government had done that and Anne Summers was then Director of the Office for the Status of Women in Canberra. I would have to say she has been a great influence and supporter to me over many, many years. I knew her in journalism and then in the Women's Adviser's role. We were able, with our colleagues in other states, to create a lot of initiatives and I could go to John Bannon and say, well this is happening in Canberra, it's going really well, Victoria is interested. We could kind of work off each other to put pressure on the governments and I think we always used to work like that. We would have women in the community as advocates and then we'd be at the other end putting pressure on the politicians and the bureaucracy, so it was like a pincer movement, and that's why it was great in South Australia because we were so close to the community. We weren't lost in a bureaucracy which you might be in Sydney or some of the bigger cities. And we were able to maximise the effectiveness of what we were doing.

[00:14:10]

MURPHY: Speaking of effectiveness and impacts on the community and women, what do you think was your biggest achievement, biggest impact, positive impact on women?

TRELOAR: On women. The biggest achievement - gosh. I think the work that we did in setting up the Domestic Violence Council was really important. It was the first time that people at the top of the police, the justice system, the women's shelters, other women's groups were all in the one room, working out what actually needed to be done to support women, to give them access to genuine police protection, because there was, I think in those days, the police just turned their back on what they called Domestic Violence, so it was a hard battle. We had a couple of senior guys in the police, however, who were very, very supportive. I would have to say, in a lot of the things that we did, if you found someone like that ---, there was a guy called Inspector John Murray, another guy, Phillip Cornish, they were fantastic and they were on side and they were very cooperative with the women's issues. I think that was one of the huge things. I think after I left, I think there was a Domestic Violence Unit set up. I think Carmel went and worked in it - Carmel O'Loughlin. Linda Matthews went and worked in it. I am not sure after a number of years, where it actually has ended up, but there is certainly greater recognition now of the importance of the issue. But there are probably lots of other areas I could name as well.

[00:16:08]

MURPHY: I'm sure there are plenty. Thank you. Can you tell me about some of the people that you worked with and how perhaps they shaped your views on reforms for women?

TRELOAR: Oh okay. Well I would have to give credit to some of the great women I worked with. People like Carmel, people like Clare Byrt, people like Ngaire Naffin, who is now professor of law at Adelaide University. She worked with us on rape law reform and on domestic violence issues. Suzanne Carman, who has sadly passed away. Rhonda Sharp, who I brought in to do a major - she was an economist - I brought her in to our staff. She did a great project on women and superannuation, because in those days women didn't even know that they could join and in most cases they weren't allowed to join. If they were married, they didn't have ongoing employment and very few women understood the importance, and as one American feminist said that they were just one heartbeat

away from poverty i.e. their husbands. So that was a great project. Those women were all fantastic. Others I worked with were - John Bannon himself was fantastic, Peter Duncan was great in terms of giving me an understanding of law reform and how to pursue that. John Bannon was a very thoughtful, intelligent considered man, open to argument and persuasion, not always easy to persuade because he was by nature cautious, but very keen once he could see the - grasp the kind of the argument for doing something or pursuing a reform he was keen to make sure it happened and he was very interested in the whole area.

MURPHY: Wonderful, thank you. Would you be able to tell me about some of the really high points in your career and perhaps share a low point or two?

TRELOAR: Oh gosh!

MURPHY: If you feel up to it. (both laugh) It's okay if you don't.

[00:18:32]

TRELOAR: Okay, that's fine. Look I've had so many high points. My career's gone in lots of different directions. I loved being a journalist, I'd have to say, when I was with the Financial Review. I loved that because firstly it was a highly credible newspaper, so if you wanted to speak to someone, like a senior cabinet minister, a Premier or federally, even a Prime Minister, you could generally be sure you'd get access, so you felt like you were in the centre of what was happening in that world where politics and business connects. It wasn't just about that. I wrote stories about social policy and social impact, about refugees and migrants - all sorts of things that impacted on society in those days. I loved that.

I loved being Women's Adviser. I loved the connection with the women's organisations, with WIS (Women's Information Switchboard), the staff here and the volunteers were fantastic. I can remember people like Helga Lemon and the great Luisa Sheehan, Nicky Dimitropoulos and Sophie Alexiou. Luisa and Nicky ran programs for women on 5EB1- radio programs in their first language. So that was a fantastic way of bridging a lot of gaps and reaching women who normally may not have been able to get the kind of information or advice or just even hear people talking about women's things - cooking. I think they sometimes did those

sorts of sessions as well. It's hard to remember that there was nothing like that - no information. The world of communications - yes, there was television, but it was much more about more conventional kinds of topics.

[00:20:40]

MURPHY: We will go to talking a little bit about WIS (Women's Information Switchboard) now, if that's okay?

TRELOAR: Okay, sure.

MURPHY: Can I ask when did you first hear about WIS (Women's Information Switchboard)?

TRELOAR: Well I knew in the late seventies, when I was here, that Deborah McCulloch and Andi Sebastian had been working hard to set it up. I thought it was a fantastic move and ever since then I really had known about WIS (Women's Information Switchboard) and its various incarnations. So when I came back as Women's Adviser and found out that I was responsible in the government for WIS, I was Chair of the WIS Management Committee. I was also Chair of the Working Women's Centre's Management Committee.

MURPHY: May I ask what your impression of WIS (Women's Information Switchboard) was before you joined the Management Committee?

TRELOAR: Oh, okay. Well I thought it was a kind of a hive of energy and activity. Everyone was busy, the phones were ringing, people were talking, women were coming in, sometimes tentatively and not feeling secure about talking about what their issues were. So whenever I came in I always thought I was walking into a kind of liveliness and a very supportive environment. And there was (cough) a Welfare Rights Centre set up by Maggie Calver, so that

(Break for drink of water)

MURPHY: We are continuing the interview with Carol Treloar. After you had joined the Management Committee of WIS, what were your thoughts about WIS then? Did they change, were they the same?

TRELOAR: I suppose my regard for WIS (Women's Information Switchboard) really grew. I thought WIS was a fantastic service provider and was so responsive and supportive of women when they came with issues and problems. So I took WIS very seriously as our kind of barometer in the community of what was happening, what the issues were, whether it was health or whether it was education or violence, family law, all those issues.

[00:23:12]

MURPHY: Do you think those things that you learnt from WIS (Women's Information Switchboard) , as you say WIS was a barometer, do you think that helped shape some of your policies?

TRELOAR: Oh, definitely, definitely! We ran a program and produced a really good report on Women in the Home and that was directly related to some of their---, I suppose WIS (Women's Information Switchboard) kind of instigated a lot of those kinds of projects for us. The Women's Employment Strategy, because women were stranded and didn't know how to get back into work after having families. Older women's issues, isolation. We had an Older Women's Advisory Group and I think a lot of the people, if it wasn't started from WIS, which it may well have been, it was certainly embraced by WIS and kick started from, with the support of WIS. We had Hazel Hawke for example come over and open that. A great big speak out at the Town Hall and we had those kind of connections. We were able to do that and that was wonderful. She was a great supporter of older women and what WIS was doing, the advice that was being given, so it was terrific.

MURPHY: How do you think your role linked, expanded or encouraged new services for women? One example might be "Do you think your role provided better services for rural women"?

TRELOAR: For rural women?

MURPHY: Just as an example.

TRELOAR: Yes, I think that we certainly started up, or women wanted to start up

in the rural communities, so there were information services set up in Whyalla, in Port Pirie. I know that Switchboard went up to Coober Pedy at one stage. I went up to the APY Lands with Margaret Crosby, who was the indigenous officer at Switchboard and we went to several communities, sat down with the women, talked with them about what they were concerned about and a lot of it was about domestic violence, how they, in their remote areas could deal with it, how they could find safe places to go. One of the ideas that was put to us, and I've never forgotten and I tried to pass it on, was the idea of using some of the Sacred Women's places as safe places, because that was somewhere where if the men were drunk or angry or violent may not go. So therefore they would remain safe. It was a really worthwhile exercise. Equally we went to Country Women's Association annual meetings and conferences. We really worked across the board. Also into the suburbs. We worked with the Neighbourhood Houses Movement. There was a woman called Mary Sobotka, who ran that and I don't know whether they exist anymore.

[00:26:28]

MURPHY: I was going to ask, is that similar to Neighbourhood Watch?

TRELOAR: No, no. It was much more a community, not about security as much. The Neighbourhood Houses were like hubs for people, women and men to go, but there were a lot of women there. And they were like information centres or places where women could find out what to do, or, I think they had craft sessions. They were very empowering. That was the network. Yes, definitely. The Women's Shelters I think have probably expanded since my day, I hope they have. They are certainly needed. Yes, I think in some ways the services have disappeared in government. I am not sure there are Equal Opportunity Units in all the departments now, as there were then. I think some of the government people would say, those services are now part of the mainstream, which might be true, but I've always felt you need to have something separate as well, because it's not just dealing with specific needs, but also with advocacy and prompting change, and being a bit of a thorn in the side of the system.

MURPHY: What were the things the Management Committee achieved that

impacted either positively or negatively on WIS?

TRELOAR: Look it's a long time ago, Kati (laugh). I can't remember exactly the very issues, but I know that the Management Committee dealt with issues as they came up, through the staff and the volunteers. We were also just simply looking after the organisational wellbeing, the practical issues that needed to be dealt with as well.

MURPHY: Okay.

TRELOAR: I can't think of any specific issues that came up.

MURPHY: That's fine. Just to round off the interview we'd just like to hear some of your thoughts - we'll move on from WIS, but we'd like to hear some of your thoughts about feminism and how it's changed over the last forty years, if it has changed, how, if not, why?

TRELOAR: Yes, sure.

MURPHY: Just some general thoughts.

[00:29:14]

TRELOAR: Look I think it has changed. I think in the earlier days it was more of a kind of enclave of women who were activists and advocates and feminism was not always a well-received term by some women as well as by lots of men. I think it has become much wider now in terms of being accepted as a term. I think things, like Julia Gillard and her removal, seemed to inspire a whole lot of younger women who really, not just that, but many, many other issues that they are dealing with - realising that the glass ceilings are there, that life isn't - their dreams aren't going to always be realised the way they want. But the educational opportunities are certainly greater now than they were, but I think feminism now is a much more accepted label. I think so many women regard themselves as feminists and some men regard themselves as very pro-feminist in their attitudes and want to see barriers dismantled, want to see women given more opportunities. That goes right through to the issues of women in the boardrooms in business. I would have to say that while, in Australia things have gone well, I

think there are issues that are still great battles to be won - about enough childcare---

MURPHY: Perhaps enough affordable childcare.

TRELOAR: Affordable childcare for women, I think, is still absolutely huge. Services for women who are victims of violence is a huge area of great need still. Women in the workforce, access to superannuation, access to promotion, access to boardrooms - while there has been change there's an awful lot that hasn't been done. In the community, just women who are isolated, indigenous women whose health status is still far too poor. That's a major issue that the whole of the community needs to address, in partnership with indigenous communities and indigenous women. There have been breakthroughs in things like, belatedly however, in women and sport. I have been delighted to see the new football leagues and see our cricketers getting a decent pay rate at last. Seeing our Matildas out there winning the World Cup, and things like that. I mean they are belated, but they're very, very welcome. So there are an awful lot of areas where change still needs to occur and feminism should be hard fought and hopefully victories won.

[00:32:36]

MURPHY: How do you think politics affects outcomes for women today?

TRELOAR: Oh, I think it is hugely important. Attitudes by politicians are really important. The more women that there are in politics I think, largely and women who are strong advocates for other women, the better things have become. I've had great respect for people like Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence. In South Australia, women Ministers, Zoe Bettison. In the older days people like Rosemary Crowley at the Federal level. I think women working together in politics can also make a difference, so there's a kind of necessary critical mass, which allows the women themselves to become advocates within their own political parties. On the other side of politics, I always had great respect for Jenny Cashmore, she was Health Minister in the Tonkin government. She was a great Minister and a terrific woman. So, there are certainly ---, and Julia Gillard, I think, as our first female Prime Minister. While lots of people have some, you know, equivocation about

her, I think she was a great leader and achieved policy outcomes that will be with us for a long time to come. And probably are yet to be properly acknowledged.

MURPHY: Thank you. Is there anything else that you would like to add, perhaps?

TRELOAR: I guess I would like to emphasise that the great heroes in my experience and my view are the ordinary women, so called, out there. I don't like that term. It is very hard to find a better descriptor, but women in the community who are living their lives, struggling, doing well, supporting each other, managing their families, managing poverty, struggling in poverty, not managing it probably, women in housing and access to housing is a big issue. So, my final, I guess ultimate emphasis is that it is the women out there who are doing things on an everyday basis who are the real heroes.

MURPHY: Thank you, Carol.

[00:35:26]

END OF INTERVIEW

NOTE: In the context of this interview, the abbreviation WIS refers to the Women's Information Switchboard, which was established in 1978.

In 1996 the Women's Information Switchboard was renamed the Women's Information Service.