**SWIM INSPIRING STORIES: Professor Lou Harms**

Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences, The University of Melbourne

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**NATALIE HANNAN**

I'd like to start by acknowledging today I'm hosting today's "Inspiring Stories" webinar on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, custodians and leaders of this incredible land and waters for thousands and thousands of years. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge and pay our respects to their elders past, present, and future. I welcome any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders here with us today. And I'd also like to celebrate and thank all of our First Nations colleagues for their important contribution to our academy. So thank you all for joining me today.

I'm Professor Natalie Hannan, the Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion for the Faculty Medicine, Dentistry, and Health Sciences. And as many of you know, I firmly believe that we have the right to a safe, fair, and equitable workplace, a place where an individual's background or race, their gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation, disability, or mental health issues should not be a barrier to reaching their full potential. And we are certainly surrounded by impressive and accomplished women breaking barriers and challenging the status quo regarding women and what women can achieve. And yet in 2022, women still remain underrepresented at senior and leadership levels within our faculty. Although I'm excited to say that we've certainly begun to see real change over the past couple of years, and str moving to reduce that gap, but we still have work to do for both gender equity and broader diversity and inclusion. It's my hope that by having conversations that challenge our systems and inspire leadership from within that this will not only support our talented people in MDHS to reach their full potential but will also shine an important light on the various barriers our people face.

I'm absolutely thrilled today to welcome one of our faculty's very inspiring women, Professor Lou Harms, to talk a bit about promoting equity and resilience and adapting to change. So many of you will know Lou, but for those who haven't realized how impressive Lou is, Professor Lou Harms has a Bachelor of Arts, a Master of Social Work, and a PhD in Social Work from the University of Melbourne. After a decade of working in social work practice in hospitals and the educational context, in the year 2000, Lou moved into academia, which we're very grateful for, taking her interest in trauma, resilience, and recovery into her teaching and her research. Lou Harms is the Chair and Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne. She is also the Deputy Head of the School of Health Sciences in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, and Health Sciences. Between 2015 and 2019, Lou was the Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion for our faculty. And reflective of her longstanding concern with facilitating structural and cultural change.

Lou's research focuses on the interplay between adversity, growth, and recovery at an individual and community level. She has a particular interest in strength-based approaches to understanding trauma and resilience in post-disaster recovery context. Lou is the chief investigator on the Beyond Bushfires longitudinal study of recovery from the Victorian Black Saturday bush fires, and there's some fantastic publications I encourage you to look at. Lou, thank you so much for joining me.

You're an incredible inspiration to me and so many others.

**LOU HARMS**

Thanks Nat, thanks for having me. As we start, I want to acknowledge too, that I'm on land here at the university and would like to pay my respects to elders past and present and thank you for this opportunity to talk with you all today.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

It's great to have you here. I was hoping that we might start by finding out a little bit more about you and what it was that motivated you to a career as a social worker, and then also taking that step towards research and academia.

**LOU HARMS**

I was on track here when I was doing my Bachelor of Arts to do Psychology. As a result of an open day conversation with someone, discovered that social work was the area that I wanted to connect with. So the detour into social work happened as a result of that open day. I'm a fervent believer in those open day conversations having been so influenced myself. But what that set me on a path was to really appreciate, yes, people's inner worlds are important, but it's people's social and structural and cultural worlds that often define our wellbeing and lived experience. And that began my career in social work.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Yes. Open Days. Speaking to some of the researchers and PhDs at the Open Days, and just having a chat with them is brilliant. We are really lucky to have you both as a professional social worker, and an academic here in the faculty. So thank you. Touching on that, you're clearly a leading voice in recovery after trauma and resilience. Can you tell us why it's so important that when someone's been through something like that, that people reflect on their experience during a traumatic event, and where possible, look at their recovery or their growth after that?

**LOU HARMS**

I think I first became aware of that when I was a hospital social worker. Working with many families who were losing children who died or became disabled because of injury and the like and realising that people's capacity for recovery is complex and extraordinary. That triggered an interest for me in trauma and resilience. Within that, as you say, the importance of listening and being heard being so fundamental, if I translate that to where I am now in say some of the work around equity and diversity, so much of that hadn't even been heard about. When I was in the Associate Dean role, the university was just starting to listen and through the work with the Athena Swan Project and from the analysis that went on across the university and the faculty, we were hearing about the private trauma of people's experiences, perhaps not of the same in nature of those families back in my early days, but the importance of listening to the unique issues that particularly women were facing in the faculty. And so that thread of listening, understanding difference, but commonality and experience, and then looking for systems change, I think has been what's driven me most of my working life.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

It’s a really important point, I think. We probably heard rumblings of things like diversity, equity, and inclusion maybe ten years ago. But I think finally the world and society is more open to hearing about what the problems are and what we can do to fix or work towards bringing some of those barriers down.

As the current head of Department of Social Work, the Deputy Head of School of Health Sciences, as well as in your previous role as Associate Dean, I'm interested to hear more about your thoughts on how we all can ll play a part in facilitating that structural and cultural change.

**LOU HARMS**

I think that first step is the listening and talking together. There's great strength in the conversation. And some of those are courageous conversations that need to take place. I think what I've learned through my career here at the university is some of those conversations are a little more hidden and then eye-opening when they happen. So a really profound experience for me was participating in the Academic Women in Leadership program in 2008 because suddenly individuals were coming together, sharing stories, and then going out with a change agenda that was common and yet unique. And so I think for every one of us here, it's thinking particularly in that equity and diversity space where there are barriers, let's keep talking about them, let's understand them really deeply. And then look at the solutions that are there and change that narrative where solutions aren't possible. I think that's the other piece, they're all choices. And so how does the university, the faculty department at my level choose to respond to the issues that that are longstanding, but certainly not necessarily intractable?

**NATALIE HANNAN**

And you and I, we've talked before about sometimes even just having this conversation today and having other conversations particularly for our early career academics coming through to, hear more talk about this and I guess trust that we acknowledge as an issue and hopefully we can move towards improving that. And I think the knock on effects should also be for others, so we’re not only thinking about gender equity, but equity across the board and thinking a bit more intersectionally. If we have these conversations, hopefully it normalizes that we know that there's a problem and that we're trying different things to work towards facilitating that structural and cultural change within the organization. But as you say, also at the local levels as well.

**LOU HARMS**

Yes I think at that local level, that's really important. I've been the Deputy Head of the Department of Social Work since 2006 and then coming into the headship in 2019, I had a sense that I had a grasp on a lot of the issues that were happening in the department, and particularly around the equity space. When I came into the role, I had discussions with every member of staff individually by invitation, they didn't have to come and talk, but they were fabulous conversations because I think it was a real reminder that the more rank you have, the less you see it, as the saying goes, that over time I become immune to very, very local issues or just not seeing very, very local issues. So one of the things I keep trying to keep very actively alive is a regular meeting with the ECRs and NCRs, teaching and research staff and the senior group and bringing those conversations back together constantly. And those kind of feedback loops have been necessary. But it was a real wake up call that we think we know our business and we don't, and its constant conversation to really understand what's happening for people at really local levels.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

It's that counter balance, isn't it? As you climb up, people can't necessarily, or don't necessarily feel comfortable to come and tell you about the small things. But sometimes the small things are the things that are really important and that are underlying the culture, and it simmers away if we don't give it attention. And as you say, the early career academics, and as well, our professional staff, I find also are brilliant to let us know a little bit about what they're seeing, what their experiences are, so that we can keep grounded in what we want to push through at the leadership level. I think that's great advice.

As an expert in resilience, I thought I'd get your thoughts on resilience for people who feel marginalised. A lot of people will respond and say, "well, we shouldn't have to be resilient. We should change the system, reduce the inequities rather than individuals needing to become resilient". I think there's a place for resilience. I was wondering what as well you thought about that.

**LOU HARMS**

I’m a huge advocate and cynic of the notion of resilience. I think that it comes back to how you define resilience because in that kind of characterisation, that's taking it back to an individual trait level. Whereas if we're thinking of resilience as a process, it's the inextricable link that happens between a person and their context. So, there's no such thing as a resilient person per se, unless there are those enabling resources really in the context in which we live. I love Michael Engard's definition of resilience. He's a Canadian social worker and he talks about resilience as *navigation and negotiation of resources*. And in that sense, if someone is not feeling resilient, it's about the context that they're in, not a personal failing. So really shifting that definition and for us to all be thinking about what our resilient contexts and environments are and how do we all come to create those kinds of safe places and safe resources. The other element of that I think is thinking about cultural context there, that there's no one size fits all of resilience, it's about the context that gives meaning and cultural context for a person to be their very best.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

That's a really important point. We hear the saying that we might be all in the same storm, but we're not necessarily in the same boat.

**LOU HARMS**

Some of us may not even have a boat.

I think the COVID context and the inequities that have been exposed, that were always there, but that have been exposed through this prolonged period; we have to be thinking about those resilient processes in the years ahead.

If anything, our Beyond Bushfires study showed that it's long term. We followed people up at 10 years after the Victorian Black Saturday Bushfires, and people were still coping with the demands of those fires. But there were different patterns throughout those ten years for everyone. So we are all going to hope when we get to a COVID recovery, be working in very different ways to manage our day to day and that's where I think that radar for equitable outcomes for everyone from this in terms of promotion and academic pathways and careers is critical. It's not like a window of one- or two-years. This is long term impact.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I guess the marathon, not the sprint.

**LOU HARMS**

That's right. It's lots of work still to do. I think also important to celebrate where there has been recovery or moved to better things, particularly with gender equity, looking at some of the data more recently to see the increasing numbers of women applying for promotion, and also being promoted. And now our Associate Professor and Professoriate levels reflecting more of what we know is population parity. So, there is lots to still do, but certainly good to reflect on that.

We often hear people that have this off the cuff response to when we are trying to progress some of these things, and we mustn't lose excellence through adjustment for relative to opportunity or adjustment for career interruptions. And so as both a healthcare professional and an academic, I wondered if you had thoughts of how you think we could be better at promoting that enhancing equity and diversity doesn't compromise excellence.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

And I think first and foremost, we know that the pool is large enough that all that excellence is there. It's about the gateway of that excellence and who gets to go through that gateway. Any of the studies that have looked much more deeply at that sort of merit argument, or do we have enough strong academically qualified women?

**LOU HARMS**

Of course, we do for any of these sorts of pathways. I often think of the statement that our former Associate Dean, Indigenous Shaun Ewan used to raise with us around it's not relative to *opportunity*, it's relative to *privilege*. And if we turn that conversation around and say, well, what's the privilege that has opened the gateway here and how do we bring that privilege to others? If it's the privilege of time or the privilege of resourcing, there are things that can be resourced. We can come back to that kind of conversation. But I think that immediately switches the debate around and that to say this is actually about structures that are creating really tight pathways that some people, so-called naturally, but in actually very manufactured ways can breeze through. Let's rethink that gateway. By opening the gateway, we're certainly seeing there's no compromise in quality or excellence there. So it's never losing a debate around excellence or merits as it's called.

What I would love to see in that relative discussion, and we are seeing it in the promotion applications that are coming through is all the other skills and multi-talents that people are having in juggling life in order to be a really good academic. I think those narratives are so profound at the promotion committee table when you're actually realising what people have been doing and still doing all of this, that counts as the academic pathway. So changing that narrative I think is really important, changing the processes, and that lends to the relative to opportunity case is right and proper, but also changing the resources that sit around that as well.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

That's great advice. I couldn't agree more when you're thinking about promotion/ fellowship applications that we have the privilege of reading. When you think about the things that they've had to learn to do, and become resilient or adapt to change, then this is why diversity is important when you think about it, when you think what they're bringing to that position or that fellowship or that being seen as a senior scholar in the faculty, I think it's just absolutely amazing to see what some people have been able to do. And I think that just speaks volumes to what people can achieve, but also as you mentioned, what is excellence and how do we define it? I think that's brilliant.

I recently watched your wonderful graduation address, and you talked about gender equality and it was interesting because at that time you mentioned how it took a quarter of a century from when our faculty first came about to actually allow women. For a quarter of a century, the faculty was men only. We fast forward to now and we see, we have huge numbers of women entering our faculty at the undergraduate, graduate, and the post-doctoral levels. We also have our first woman Dean and we've got an amazing representation of women in senior leadership positions across the whole of the faculty. What do you think the university could or should focus on now as we need to adapt for more change in the midst of this pandemic, and also the global climate crisis that we're facing. Big question.

**LOU HARMS**

Big question there. I think there's both a maintenance agenda of all that achievement, which could very quickly go backwards in the wake of COVID's impacts and the, particularly as I know, for many women around the carer responsibilities with children and the recovery out of COVID. So I think it's keeping a very close eye that this success is a maintained success.

Then I think it's really attending to the other pillars of the university’s diversity strategy. I think our indigenous staff and student allyship and growth is a critical agenda for us. What are the ways in which we can bring in the strength of Indigenous knowledges centrally into the university? I think on the disability side, I despair when I look out my window here in the Alan Gilbert building and see how inaccessible our campus is. And again, you could sort of say they're quick wins. And yet I know when Megan and Kath and others were working with me on disability and inclusion analysis of the university, access was an issue years ago. So I think there's some quick wins with that, but I think it's looking at where do we want to be so that the people we need here in the university are here?

I think that also relates very strongly to our cultural and gender diversity as well. And there are a range of issues around recruitment priorities and internal cultural work. I think Jane Gunn as our Dean has led and continues to lead so much work in that space for us as a faculty, as do you, and think it's it's where do we want to be is the question that should drive it rather than where have we been or where are we stuck? It is how do we get to the next 5, 10, 15 years ahead?

I remember in that address that you are referring to, Nat, that I gave at the graduation. I think that year in biomedicine, the top five students had been women. And again, thinking back, would that have been the aspiration, here were people saying women couldn't even come to the university, here we are excelling at the university. How do we want to excel in 50 to 100 years time should also be on the agenda, because this is all the foundation of our students and graduates.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I think you're right. Sustaining what we've done and not getting complacent just because we've had some wins. Also, as you say, uncover some of those extra areas that need our more support going forward; how do we rally together and do that. I think that's some great advice, Lou, thank you. I wanted to thank you again, Lou, so much for joining us today and discussing the promotion of equity and resilience and adapting to change.

And thanks to everybody again for joining. I’m hoping that everyone will be available to join us on October the 18th, with Associate Professor Shawana Andrews, the director of Poche. Shawana and I will talk about Indigenous health and supporting indigenous women and the beneficial effects to community. So that will be a great conversation with Shawana in October.

Thank you again, Lou, for your time, your generosity, your wisdom and all your support of all the different things that you're involved with, your research, and your leadership.

**LOU HARMS**

Thanks so much, Nat. It's been a great conversation.