

A Conversation About Women in Lighting & Design

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At LightShow West in October, four powerhouse lighting designers joined me for a panel discussion on some of the issues of gender bias, discrimination and salary inequity that percolate under today's sexual harassment headlines. Lighting designers Eileen Thomas, Heather Libonati and Ramona Pratt along with specification sales rep Lauren Dandridge Gaines described a male-dominated workplace where discrimination remains an obstacle and only a third of IALD Fellows identify as women. But what shines through in the edited transcript below are constructive strategies to speak up; ask for what you want and need. Seek out a workplace where women are valued and professional development is encouraged. Question whether an independent consultancy is right for you.

First and foremost, look to the women who have already trod the path ahead of you, and succeeded.

We began the discussion with some background on WILD, Women in Lighting + Design. After a few years of social gatherings, WILD is gaining traction back East. The New York City “chapter” is hosting regular presentations and networking events, with groups in Chicago, Denver, Philadelphia and St. Louis. Along with LightShow West, Enlighten Americas, Lightfair and the LED Specifier Summit



in Chicago all had WILD events as part of their programming 2017. San Diego has had annual Ladies in Lighting events, but the LightShow West panel was the inaugural WILD event on the West Coast. The consensus was to name the group WILD West, which beat out WILD LA.

The mission of WILD is to provide all women in lighting and design an inclusive and open environment for professional and personal growth by offering community, mentorship and knowledge sharing.

What constitutes a diverse and supportive firm? What does it look like from the outside? What can an owner do to ensure a supportive and diverse environment for women in their firm?

RAMONA: We're a relatively small industry. We all kind of know each other, and it's relatively easy to find out information on other firms. A firm that's supportive will have low turnover. In a firm with open communication, gossip isn't tolerated, and change is welcome.

One of the first lighting design firms I worked for in Philadelphia, they would interview potential hires and then set them free in the office. Candidates went from station to station and talked to current staff members without management standing there. People would open up and you could get a sense if they were happy there. It's also a way to see female leadership, if it's present. It also benefits management, because the staff provides input on the potential hires, which I think increases diversity. The staff felt like they had a voice in the process.

EILEEN: You can't always judge a book by its cover. Just because a firm has female leadership, it doesn't mean they're going to be women-friendly, or if all the principals are men they're not going to understand you. I've worked for both kinds of companies and had the opposite experience.

We are a small community, so you ask your sales reps or your friends. Sales reps are great resources because they are in a lot of offices. They know who's happy and not happy and what the culture is inside a firm.

HEATHER: You can also just look at some of their general policies in terms of how supportive they are to women? Do they offer flexible work schedules? Do they have in-house daycare? What is their maternity leave policy?

LOIS: I'll add to that the availability of elder care or an option to work from home.

I think a firm should advertise that it is an equal-opportunity employer. It at least shows that it's top-of-mind in hiring and policies.

EILEEN: I would look for firms that encourage their employees to attend events, to sit on boards and to expand their knowledge and their networks. Some firms are only concerned with billable hours. A supportive firm encourages your professional development and encourages mentoring or coaching.

Communication can be an issue for anyone, particularly young people and women. What communication skills can facilitate success?

LAUREN: You know how sometimes you know someone well and all of sudden they surprise you by answering the phone in an entirely different "phone voice"? It's the same thing when you go into a meeting and you're the only woman there. You drop your voice down a bit, and you know you're going to have to be a little bit more assertive. Maybe even aggressive sometimes. You may not be just the only woman in that particular meeting, but sometimes the only woman who goes into that firm. Women lighting professionals are sort of sprinkled around, but I find myself the only woman in the room often. Sometimes you have to change your manner of speaking or the way you present yourself, so that you're received in a manner that's productive.

Lauren Dandridge Gaines is a specification sales agent at [Performance Lighting Systems](#). A former award-winning lighting designer, she is on the adjunct faculty at the University of Southern California School of Architecture.



HEATHER: We all agree that sometimes as a woman it's difficult to be assertive. There's an inherent fear of coming across as a bitch, so it's tricky to effectively communicate what your boundaries are, what your needs are, and keep it professional. Be firm without seeming like you're hostile.

RAMONA: If you tend to be more on the quiet, shy side, make your presence known early on in the meeting. It's much harder to do later. Step up and shake everyone's hand and say their name and be sure to interject something quickly. You have to make it known that you're intelligent and you know what you're talking about early on.

LOIS: With someone I don't know, I find I have to establish early on, the level that I'm talking. Even if it's a question that I don't really need to know the answer to, I will ask a challenging technical question. This can avoid a lot of time wasted with someone

explaining the ABCs of lighting to me. I don't have time for that. I find that if I come on kind of strong, I'm going to get usable information more quickly.

HEATHER: You know when you're at a kickoff meeting or it's your first time meeting the electrical engineer, it can become competitive? Two professionals vying for who's the bigger lighting expert? As a woman, maybe if the engineer doesn't identify as a woman, that game is raised just a little bit higher.

Is this occurring at project meetings or on job sites?

EILEEN: It happened to me just recently when I was reviewing a mock up. The electrical contractor treated me like I was a stupid five-year-old. I had to explain, no, I designed this and you're going to fix what I tell you to fix. I really had to be assertive, and it took a while to turn it around. Two days later he called and politely asked me to drive out and review his changes. I hadn't experienced that in a while, so it was a shock. Even today, I still have to explain that I know what I'm doing, and you need to get with the program.

HEATHER: Anytime you're having gender issues – it's likely not just a gender thing, it's often an age thing. I feel like I had more issues on job sites when I was younger. And the gentleman in Eileen's story was an older person. Another thing is geography. I find job sites in some cities, like Vegas, are a little tougher than here in Los Angeles or elsewhere in the world.

RAMONA: One advantage that we do have as lighting designers is inherently technical. I still today have problems on job sites, but usually at some point you can impress the contractor with some sort of technical solution to an issue. And then you've won them over. But it's still frustrating to get to that point.

Ramona Pratt founded Pratt Lighting Design less than a year ago. Her degree and first career were in interior design, before making the transition to architectural lighting more than 10 years ago. She is an award-winning designer, specializing in landscape lighting design.



LAUREN: I had a situation at a meeting where I knew going in that I was going to be the only woman there. I had already had a few uncomfortable meetings there; just a feeling that the guys are talking around and over me. On that particular day, I decided to make myself known. I'm going to be visible. I wore a bright pink dress to the meeting that day. I think it did help establish that I'm a physical presence in this room, apparently in a way that just wearing black doesn't.

Yes, it happens. I know what I'm talking about and I know how to communicate effectively, but I can still get over-talked. It's frustrating when you know the answer to the question on the table.

EILEEN: It's like what Lauren was talking about: you put on a persona. I spent a long time in theater working as an electrician and being the only woman on the crew. I'm as tough as anybody else. That helped prepare me for the architectural world and being on a job site. I can swear with rest of you guys, so don't piss me off.

What about communicating your issues inside the workplace – particularly salary issues?

RAMONA: Do your research. Know what other people are making at your level in your region and ask for it. Don't be afraid to negotiate. It's daunting – it always has been for me – but you have to speak up for yourself right away. It'll help you later on.

HEATHER: To be specific about research, we mean talk to other professionals that have comparable experience doing comparable jobs. Look at websites like Glassdoor. Talk to your reps and your mentors.

LOIS: It may be obvious, but speak up. They're not just going to give it to you. You have to ask.

HEATHER: But what you're asking for must be informed by facts. An unreasonable ask might be off-putting to the employer.

LAUREN: Mentorship is so important. Just being able to have a completely candid conversation with someone who has travelled your path. My students who are just entering the workforce, sometimes have an unrealistic expectation of what their expensive degree will get them. Without my advice they may pass on a job because they're assuming a firm doesn't value them.

HEATHER: When it comes to communicating your boundaries to your employer. Speak up sooner rather than later. When I was young and hungry and did everything the boss asked, I was always working late and always going above and beyond. I got really burnt out. Had I had said something sooner, I think my boss would've been more willing to accommodate and support me. But someone can't give you support unless you ask for it.

After working for several lighting design firms in Southern California, Heather Libonati founded her independent lighting design consultancy, [Luminesce Design](#), in 2006. She has taught Architectural Lighting Design at SciArc, Woodbury and Otis and is currently past president of IES Los Angeles Section.

Is a career in lighting design better for women than architecture?



LOIS: Informally surveying women on the design side of lighting, they would recommend lighting as a career for a younger woman. Whereas *Architectural Review's Women in Architecture Survey* found that fewer than half of respondents [female architects in their 30s and 40s largely based in the UK], would recommend a career in architecture for a younger woman. According to that survey, the wage gap among architects in the US and Canada, is about 20 percent.

And these discrepancies actually increase later on the career path, when education and experience are equalized. [Note that this [Harvard study](#) was not specific to architecture.]

EILEEN: I believe that part of why the lighting design field is better for women is because this field was really started by women. Lesley Wheel, who is sort of the mother of architectural lighting, founded the Designers Lighting Forum in New York and then she came to LA and founded DLF LA. She was mentored by a theatrical lighting designer, Jean Rosenthal, who really was the first woman lighting designer on Broadway back in the 1930s. (If you haven't read *The Magic of Light*, you should read just the opening chapter of her experience as a young, feisty stage manager.) This is this is our legacy.

Currently, we have a woman president of the IES; the past president of the IES is a woman; and the most recent past president of the IALD is a woman. So there's no need to break the glass ceiling. We've done it, and it's not unusual. So I think of lighting design, as a profession, as a very woman-oriented profession. Lots of women have left – and are leaving – great legacies of women in leadership roles. We all aspire to be on Lois's list of formative women in the lighting industry.

LOIS: I feel like, if I put in another 10 years doing what I'm doing, educating and fostering support for the next generation, that I will deserve to be included on this list.

HEATHER: Can I have 20?

LOIS: Yes. Absolutely.

EILEEN: As the older one of this panel, I feel that part of my job is to encourage and mentor the younger women at my firm. For that matter, anyone who wants advice, I'm happy to help them.

LAUREN: To be fair, my entire career in lighting design is due to two women who are both in this room. I cold-called them, and they took a chance on me. Without them I wouldn't have had the opportunities I have – including the opportunity to teach and mentor others. That is what mentorship and fostering relationships can do. If people are supported, they'll pass it along.

LOIS: Who wants to credit their mentor, or mentors?

EILEEN: Dawn Hollingsworth has done it all – design and manufacturing and sales. She was my mentor.

HEATHER: I would say Teal Brogden [HLB Lighting] was my mentor.

RAMONA: I would say Mark Barber from the Lighting Practice was my mentor.

LOIS: We don't do it alone.



Women in Lighting

Gertrude Rand Ferree, researcher
JoAnne Lindsley, lighting designer
Dorothy Nickerson, researcher
Helen Diemer, lighting designer
Domina Eberle Spencer, mathematician
Mariana Figueiro, researcher, educator
Mary Beth Gotti, executive, educator
Rita Harrold, standards developer
Elizabeth Donoff, editor
Francesca Bettridge, lighting designer
Jan Moyer, lighting designer, educator
Barbara Horton, lighting designer

Nancy Clanton, lighting designer
Rose Coakley, lighting designer
Ann Militello, lighting designer
Belinda Collins, researcher
Mary Webber, lighting designer
Myrtle Fahsbender, lighting designer, educator
Rita Harrold, standards development
Lisa Hescong, researcher
Priscilla Presbey, lighting designer
Aileen Page Cutler, lighting designer
Jan Reynolds, lighting designer
Mary Dodds, lighting designer
Maryrose Sylvester, executive

Sandra Stashik, lighting designer, executive
Kathy Pryzgoda, lighting designer, educator
Jennifer Veitch, researcher
Lesley Wheel, lighting designer
Motoko Ishii, lighting designer
Pamela Horner, educator, executive
Wanda Jankowski, editor
Naomi Miller, lighting designer, educator, researcher
Ruby Redford, editor
Nancy Christensen, lighting designer



Building on [Lisa Reed's article in LD+A](#), this list of formative women in lighting inspires us all. Whom did we leave off? Let us know in the comments.

How can we achieve work-life balance? Is independent consultancy the answer?

HEATHER: I do see women achieve this balance as independent consultants. There is a bit of a glass ceiling still, and I think at a certain point you should look at your employer and consider whether you can do what they do. I started my firm 11 years ago. I wanted to choose which projects I work on and what hours I'm working. Mostly I wanted to turn down those crap projects that I hate. My whole business model was to work on stuff I thought was cool with people I thought were cool. It wasn't about the firm I was working for or could work for. I'm an independent person, and I like doing things my way. So why not take a chance and do that?

Being on my own, it's been successful in terms of financial goals, professional recognition, some really great projects, and other stuff like volunteering with IESLA. And yes, I do feel like I have a life-work balance. But it's not for everyone. I have a few friends, like Ramona,

who I've encouraged to go out on their own, and so far it's working out. So if you think you might be up for it, you should give it a try.

RAMONA: It's been the same for me. I wanted a certain amount of control, and it actually happened very organically for me. I started taking a couple projects on the side that I liked doing, and it turned into a business. Heather was a great support for the logistics, getting everything in place. It hasn't even been a year yet, but I am finding that the work-life balance is different. If I want to take a couple of days off during the week and work the weekend, I can do that. There are aspects that are not so fun: billing and waiting to get paid. I know it's not for everybody, but it's working well for me. If it's something that you're thinking about, you should explore the idea.

LAUREN: For me, work-life balance is a moving target. I have a young kid at home, and technically I have two jobs: full-time as a spec salesperson and then I also teach. When the semester's over, it's a lot easier to find that point when I can close my laptop and be in my house. But there are days when it's so hard to pull myself away. I feel responsible for a lot of other people's success: students waiting to proceed with a project, a specifier needing a price or information about a project and they can't move forward without it. I am beholden to a lot of other people, including my toddler.

EILEEN: I'm here to talk about working for big firm. I just don't have that entrepreneurial spirit, and I've never really wanted to own my own firm. The upside of working for a big firm is, I can go on vacation for 2 weeks and I have people who can answer my emails and take my phone calls. I'm still reading emails when I can, but I don't have to worry about it as much. And I don't have to do the billing or buy the insurance. There's people that do all that.

I am a chronic volunteer. I've just spent the last few years on the Lightfair conference advisory committee. Lois calls me up and asks me to be on this panel? I can't say no to these things. I've got two kids in college now, so I'm an empty-nester. What do I do now? As Lauren said, work-life balance is a moving target.

Eileen Thomas is a director at [StudioK1](#), which is the lighting studio at tk1sc, a large consulting engineering firm with five locations in California. With a background in theatrical lighting, her award-winning architectural lighting designs cover a wide range of projects.

HEATHER: Prior to going out on my own, I worked at larger firms and there is something to be said for that hive mind. I'm maybe not the most social coworker to have, but I did enjoy sitting down and solving a design problem or playing my favorite game, Who Do You Know That Makes This Product? (I love that game, and I'm really good at it.) But I don't have anyone to play that game with. So I'm looking forward to activating WILD and to meeting other women designers. I challenge any of you to play it with me any time.



How does working independently affect the design process? Do we prefer a design charrette or the lonely artist struggling in the garret?

HEATHER: I have some clients that I've worked with for many years now, and we've got our collaboration down to a science. There isn't a lot of trading inspiration boards. Then there are clients where we've never worked together, so there's pressure to get a dialogue going, and there's a lot of pressure to impress. Those are always a little intimidating to me because what I've got is all me. To answer your question, it is a lot of the artist struggling alone by herself.

EILEEN: I do enjoy bouncing ideas off people. For a schematic presentation, I might put it together along with my right-hand person. And then the rest of the team will comment and make the presentation better.

I like Heather's game, too. I can't always remember which manufacturer brought in that cool XYZ product. Or someone else will ask for a product that has this or that crazy thing. It's often helpful to have that immediate interaction.

LAUREN: When I worked for Eileen, the studio director and I had a mutual design aesthetic, and our personalities really clicked. Starting with design intent, programming and ideas for the presentation and then funneling that together into the project actually worked really well for us. As a former designer, yes, the charrette has benefits.

HEATHER: One of the firms I worked at years ago, we would have Monday office meetings. One of the things we shared was lessons learned. I miss that learning from other people's mistakes. Because I never make any. Right?

Outside of in-house mentoring or coaching, what resources are available for professional development?

LOIS: I think trade shows are a great way to connect with presenters with shared interests. IES and IALD both have emerging professionals programs, and some these are active at the local level. And WILD is gaining momentum.

LAUREN: I can't overstate how great cold-calling is – especially in our industry, which is limited on people with experience and education. If you have the personality, work up your short pitch, just a sentence or two. No one out there is looking to be mean or not help you. If anything, people are just busy, and they haven't gotten back to you yet. Whether you're looking for information or support, that person wants to talk to you. So leave that voicemail or send that email. It can't hurt. Nobody's ever going to be offended because you came to them looking for help.

HEATHER: When I started my firm, it was shocking to me how generous everyone was in sharing information, whether it was architects or fellow lighting designers. When we all say that lighting design is a good profession to go into, I have found that everyone in our community is very generous with information and with support.

LOIS: So my request is that you please support each other. Return someone's phone call if they get the nerve up to call on you as a resource. One way that you can support me professionally is to send your ideas for articles and for projects that should be showcased. So we can talk about having them included in the *WestCoast Lighting Insider* newsletter.

Thank you to the panelists for contributing to this conversation. For their generosity in sharing their experience and very constructive insight – recognizing that problems do come up even today, but we have to keep talking about it, finding solutions, being resourceful and supporting one another.



About Lois I. Hutchinson

Lois I. Hutchinson is a freelance writer specializing in lighting and energy issues. She is also the content marketing mastermind behind Inverse Square LLC, a Los Angeles–based consultancy. Contact her via lightinginsider@exponation.net with your comments and any article ideas that concern the lighting community here in the Southwest.