

From Inspiration to Opportunity: Balancing the Scales for Women in STEM

At the Zonta Club of Bendigo's International Women's Day celebration, Ember Chittenden reflected on this year's theme, Balance the Scales, and the local initiatives helping inspire, support and elevate the next generation of women in STEM.

This year's International Women's Day theme, "Balance the Scales," is a call to ensure women and girls have equal access to opportunity, recognition, and leadership. Here in Bendigo, through Zonta, that global call becomes real and visible in our community.

One of the most powerful ways we do this is through the Ann Horrocks Women in STEM Award. Ann, a retired industrial chemist and long-time Zonta member, built her career at a time when women were rarely seen in laboratories or industry. She didn't just succeed—she has spent decades advocating, both locally and internationally, to create pathways for others, and continues to champion women in STEM to this day. Her leadership and impact is reflected through this award, and applications have now been extended until May 2026 so we can continue supporting the next generation of innovators.

We also recognise Siti Saleha Binte Mohamed Yakob Adil, a second-year PhD student at La Trobe University Bendigo, who represented our club at the Zonta District 23 level for the Zonta International Women in STEM Award. Siti's research is advancing animal-free scientific methods, developing innovative alternatives that have the potential to transform science and industry. Her work reflects exactly what International Women's Day calls for women not only participating in STEM but leading innovation and shaping the future. She represents the next generation of scientific leaders emerging from our own regional community.

Balancing the scales begins early. Through Zonta's financial support of the Discovery Science and Technology Centre's Girls in STEM program, Grade 5 and 6 girls begin to see themselves differently. Many continue into leadership programs at Bendigo Tech School, where I have the privilege of working, helping students build the confidence, skills, and identity needed to pursue STEM futures.

For me, this work is deeply personal. It began when I was a child and early teen, curious and determined, and it has continued through every stage of my career to where I stand today. The journey hasn't always been easy. There were barriers, moments of doubt, and times when I was the only woman in the room. Today, I am honoured to contribute locally, nationally, and internationally through committees and initiatives that champion women in STEM and amplify the collective voices of women working across these fields. Through all of this, I strongly believe that: "You cannot be what you cannot see."

When girls see women leading in STEM—in their schools, workplaces, and communities, they begin to see those possibilities for themselves.

Ann Horrocks understood this long before it became a national conversation. Through her career and her many years of advocacy with the Zonta Club of Bendigo and Zonta International, she created pathways for women who would follow.

The Zonta Club of Bendigo continues this work today. Every time we recognise, support and invest in a young woman, we are not just balancing the scales we are redefining the future, ensuring the next generation of women rise not in spite of the system, but because we chose to change it.

This International Women's Day—and in the years ahead—let us continue this work. Somewhere, a girl is watching, and what we choose to do today will determine whether she steps forward with hesitation or with certainty that she belongs.

Together, let us continue to balance the scales for every woman and girl.

