

# WOMEN *in the Workplace* THEN AND NOW: A Conversation with Nina Gruen

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In the history of women in the workforce over the last century, many battles have been fought and won. But the overwhelming amount of research, data, and articles regarding the current, less-than-ideal state of equity for the modern working woman often eclipses these advancements. While our society still struggles with gender (and other types of) equity and equality in the workplace, and while I

complain about women making 79 cents on average for every dollar a man makes in our country<sup>1</sup>, watching just one episode of *Mad Men* reminds one of the rampant workplace sexism prevalent just decades ago—the improvement of which has made possible my current employment as a structural engineer.

The only thing I lament about this change is that our connection to the time that preceded it is often lost, and hence so is our appreciation. I, as a college-educated working woman in my mid-30s, find the struggles of yesteryear both fascinating and horrifying. Unfortunately, I simply don't know many women who were in the trenches, so to speak, in the 1960s and '70s, paving the way for subsequent generations of women who choose to—or must—work to support themselves and their families.

This is where organizations like CREW provide a value that goes beyond the perks listed on the membership application. It was through CREW SF that I met Nina Gruen, an entrepreneur who has co-owned her own consulting firm with her husband, Claude Gruen, since 1970. She joined the workforce in the 1960s—contrary to the expectations of her class and gender for that time—and she has had a professional upbringing that is far different than that of successive generations, one that, frankly, is difficult for me to even imagine.

The route to professional success for a female who entered the workforce in the 1960s was undoubtedly different for each woman who achieved it. Nina's success can be attributed to many factors, but I believe it to be due to her restless, sharp mind that was easily bored and always sought challenge; her perseverance and ability to weather a constant storm of adversity; and the continual support and encouragement of her husband.

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Nina emphasizes the importance of having support from Claude, who encouraged her to join the debate team in high school and continued to push her to do "things she had the potential for, but not the nerve" throughout her career. She acknowledges that a very small number of women were bold enough to achieve success without any backing and that "the overwhelming majority would not have succeeded without someone who could show them the ropes." With Claude supporting her—and she supporting him—they have owned and operated Gruen Gruen + Associates (GG+A), a firm specializing in providing public and private entrepreneurs with contract research and analysis, consulting, and predevelopment services, for over 45 years.

Having solicited Nina's expertise and educated view on the current state of the workforce, I was surprised to hear that

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**Karen Alschuler**  
*Perkins + Will*  
1998 Past President

*CREW has fueled and spiced and expanded my career from coast to coast and from the 1980s to today! Beginning in Boston, where NEWIRE (now CREW) was founded, to New York CREW and then to CREW San Francisco, I have had the best jobs and made lifelong, powerfully valuable connections and friendships. My favorite job is always as program chair in each city... being immediately immersed in the wide world of commercial real estate and in personal contact with business, design, and thought leaders.*

*With the privilege of serving as president in Boston and San Francisco has come a 30-year window into the perseverance, perspective, and wisdom of women who have changed and will change the world we live in.*

**CREW**<sup>SF</sup>  
*past presidents*

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*Nina Gruen at an office-warming in 1976 with GG+A Staff, Nina with her Mom and sister in the 1960s, and Nina Gruen today*

she perceives that the main challenge facing modern working women is the availability of quality, affordable childcare.

No stranger to raising a family while working—she had three young boys and was pregnant with twins as she finished her graduate degree in her 20s, and then subsequently worked full-time while raising the five boys—Nina summarizes her thoughts on the effects of our country’s lackluster emphasis on childcare: “While some companies are increasingly allowing parental time, not only for new births but also for emergencies, it is definitely not enough. But given the fact that far fewer professional women ever plan to have any children, and many that do wait until their mid- to late 30s, society will lose out if it doesn’t start supporting higher levels of quality childcare.”

When she was often asked in the 1960s and ‘70s what she did with her own children each day, her response would always be, “I lock them in a closet,” which is as telling about Nina’s ability not to take things too seriously as it is about the senselessness of the question. In truth, of course, Nina and Claude had a nanny, like many upper-middle-class families have today.

Asked when she started to see a change of attitude toward women in the workplace, Nina told me, “In the mid-’80s, there was a culture shift to [companies] looking for competent women to make their gender diversity commitments.” Before that time, she says that GG+A hired mostly women as consultants due to the fact that “the supply of competent and educated women was far greater than the demand, so most were a bargain and were so happy to have a professional job that they were dedicated workers.”

As I’m not the first (nor certainly the last) to indicate an interest in Nina’s vast archive of fascinating and precisely recollected experiences—yes, she did actually have to hide in the women’s bathroom when the higher-ups would visit one of her early places of employment, as it wasn’t officially allowed to hire professional women—she recently published a book on Amazon.com entitled *Believe It or Not: The Challenges Facing One Professional Woman a Half Century Ago*. My favorite quote of hers from draft journals that were ultimately assembled into this book is “I would know when we had achieved gender equality when working women have the right to be as incompetent as men.” And, whether that particular measure is a good thing or not, she concludes that “from that perspective, gender equality is here.” ●

<sup>1</sup>Statistic from 2014 as cited by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, [www.iwpr.org](http://www.iwpr.org)

**For more about Nina Gruen, see her company website, [www.ggassoc.com](http://www.ggassoc.com), or better yet, order her book at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).**

**About the Author**



Angie Sommer is an associate at ZFA Structural Engineers, a medium-sized engineering firm with five Bay Area offices and a broad range of experience in the commercial, residential, educational, retrofit, and correctional sectors. In her spare time, she writes restaurant reviews for her blog, *Broccoli and Chocolate* ([broccoliandchocolate.com](http://broccoliandchocolate.com)); helps people write wedding vows, ceremonies, and speeches via her business, *Vow Muse* ([vowmuse.com](http://vowmuse.com)); and is a cofounder of a small collective of copywriters, *Copy Muse* ([copymuse.com](http://copymuse.com)).



**Kathy Mattes**  
*Real Estate Consultant*  
*1986 and 1996 Past President*

*I joined CREW SF during its first year, 1983. I served as president in 1986 when the organization was still in its infancy, and then 10 years later, when it had matured significantly. The leadership, organizational, and speaking skills that I gained through CREW have been invaluable in my career and other leadership roles.*

*Now, as a teacher, I can see how CREW helped me develop comfort speaking to groups. I encourage all CREW members to stretch their comfort zone through the opportunities offered by CREW.*

**CREW<sup>SF</sup>**  
*past presidents*