

C H A P T E R



THE GIRL CHILD



CRITICAL AREA OF CONCERN

Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child

- 1. Eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child.*
- 2. Eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls.*
- 3. Promote and protect the rights of the girl child and increase awareness of her needs and potential.*
- 4. Eliminate discrimination against girls in education, skills development and training.*
- 5. Eliminate discrimination against girls in health and nutrition.*
- 6. Eliminate the economic exploitation of child labour and protect young girls at work.*
- 7. Eradicate violence against the girl child.*
- 8. Promote the girl child's awareness of and participation in social, economic and political life.*
- 9. Strengthen the role of the family in improving the status of the girl child.*

OVERVIEW

Australia condemns actions that violate the human rights of children, and has criminalised physical and sexual violence against the girl child. Australia also abhors the practice of female genital mutilation, which is regarded as a form of violence against women.

The Australian Government is an active supporter of international treaties which promote the protection of girls and young women against sexual exploitation, trafficking, sexual abuse, domestic violence and female genital mutilation.

All Australian governments have implemented a wide range of legislation, policies and programmes to eradicate these harmful practices and to eliminate all forms of discrimination against girls and young women.

Overall, Australian girls and young women are not disadvantaged in terms of health, welfare and educational outcomes compared to their male counterparts. On many indicators, females have better outcomes than males. There are important exceptions, such as the incidence of child sexual abuse, eating disorders and smoking. The Australian Government recognises that cultural attitudes, sexual harassment and discrimination prevent girls and young women reaching their full potential.

The Australian Government continues to support initiatives to tackle these barriers and promote the status of the girl child, so that girls and young women can participate fully across all social, political and economic areas of society.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

1. Eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child.

EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

The Australian Government recognises that children are vulnerable to human rights violations and has put in place criminal sanctions against violence and sexual abuse and exploitation. These sanctions protect girls and young women who are especially vulnerable to these violations.

Australia is a State Party to both the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CROC) and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*. Australia is an active supporter of the elaboration of an Optional Protocol to CROC to deal with the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. The Optional Protocol provides a mechanism to redress the sexual exploitation of children and strengthens implementation of CROC through penalisation for non-compliance. Australia is participating in a Working Group developing a draft Optional Protocol to the CROC to restrict children's participation in armed conflict.

Australia is a signatory to the *Goals and Targets of the World Declaration on the*

Survival, Protection and Development of Children, which sets out goals and targets to improve the well being of children internationally.

See also:

- The 'Female genital mutilation' sections in *C: Women and Health* and *I: Human Rights of Women*.
- *B: Education and Training of Women*, *F: Women and the Economy* and *I: Human Rights of Women* for details on legislation and other measures to eliminate discrimination against girls and young women.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

2. Eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls.

A wide range of policies and programmes have been implemented by the Australian Government to combat sex stereotyping, child abuse and neglect, child pornography, harassment against girls in education and training and to provide support for 'girls at risk'. These are detailed throughout in this report.

MARRIAGE

The age of consent to marry is 18 years for men and women. A person aged 16 or 17 years may obtain court authorisation to marry another specific

person who is aged 18 years or older if the circumstances are exceptional and unusual as to justify the order. In addition to such authorisation, the underage person must also obtain parental consent to the marriage.

A marriage is void where the parties do not consent to it. Where the consent of either party is obtained by fraud or duress, the marriage is also void.

It is a criminal offence for a celebrant to solemnise or purport to solemnise a marriage knowing or having reason to believe that the marriage would be void.

See also:

- *B: Education and Training of Women* for details on initiatives to combat sex stereotyping and support for 'girls at risk'.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

3. Promote and protect the rights of the girl child and increase awareness of her needs and potential.

All Australian governments pursue educating women, men, boys and girls to promote girls' status and encourage them to work towards mutual respect and equal partnership between girls and boys. In addition, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission plays a major role in educating the community about human rights, including women's human rights.

The Australian Government has funded several initiatives to increase young women's awareness of the full range of education, training and employment options available to them. These include:

- activities to encourage youth involvement in the community or reinforce a positive image of young Australians (eg, *Young Australian of the Year Awards*; *National Youth Week*; *The Rock Eisteddfod*; *National Battle of the Bands* and the *National Youth Media Awards*);
- measures to increase young people's knowledge and understanding of government programmes and services for young people. These include *Voices of Youth*, the *Training and Youth Online Newsletter* and the *source* web site. The *Have Your Say* page on the website gives young people the chance to talk to the Government about youth issues generally, as well as have their questions referred to appropriate areas for a response; and
- the production and dissemination of career information materials including *The Job Guide*, a *Career Planning Information and Services Directory* and careers publications.

See also:

- *B: Education and Training of Women* for details on: the CEDAW resource

kit; the *Discovering democracy* programme; and measures to broaden girls' career choices.

- The 'Female genital mutilation' section in C: *Women and Health and I: Human Rights of Women*.
- The 'International Aid' section in I: *Human Rights of Women*.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

4. *Eliminate discrimination against girls in education, skills development and training.*

COMPULSORY EDUCATION

In Australia, all children between the ages of 5-6 and 15-16 years (some three million children) are required by law to attend either a government school, or some other government-approved educational programme. Although the final two secondary school years (Years 11 and 12) beyond age 15-16 years are not compulsory, young people are encouraged to complete these years and most do. The retention rate is higher for girls than for boys. Children in remote country areas and those with disabilities can access school education through other modes of service delivery, including distance education or special education.

GENDER FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOLS

The *National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools* (1987) and the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-97* provided a nationally agreed framework for meeting the educational needs of girls and boys. *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (1997) builds on this completed work. The Framework proposed broad areas for action based on five strategic directions in the areas of: understanding the process of construction of gender; curriculum, teaching and learning; violence and school culture; post-school pathways; and supporting change. Specific outcomes are provided for each strategic direction, together with a range of approaches and strategies that will ensure that the overall intentions of the Framework are achieved.

GIRLS' EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Educational outcomes for females across a number of key indicators are better than for males. For example, girls have higher literacy levels than boys and retention rates to Year 12 are consistently higher for girls than boys (77.7 % for girls compared with 65.9 % for males in 1998).

CHILD PROTECTION

The Australian Government introduced child protection education as a mandatory component of the school curriculum. Comprehensive support materials have been provided to all schools, dealing with power in relationships, recognising abuse and protective strategies in a range of situations such as sex-based harassment and domestic violence.

PREGNANT ADOLESCENTS

The Australian Government commissioned research into the education, training and employment needs of pregnant adolescents.

The Australian Government's inquiry into pregnancy and work included an examination of the experiences and barriers facing pregnant adolescents, including harassment and difficulties associated with completing school or training. The report contains recommendations to address these issues, which are currently under consideration by the Government.

See also:

- *B: Education and Training of Women.*

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

5. Eliminate discrimination against girls in health and nutrition.

Health and welfare outcome measures for children and youth of both sexes in Australia compare favourably with other OECD countries and are consistently better than most non-OECD and developing countries. Australian girls and young women have better outcomes than males for several indicators such as mortality rates. However, they face disadvantages in several areas, particularly in relation to smoking, sexual abuse and adolescent eating disorders.

In addition, the Australian Government recognises the historical and social factors, which continue to affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children because of race and gender. It is the Government's policy to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's concerns and needs are addressed in the design and delivery of policies and programmes across all portfolios. The Government is determined to make improvements in the key areas of health, housing, education, employment and economic development. Indigenous specific spending is now the highest it has ever been in real terms. This focus on improvement and growth will benefit entire communities.

INFANTICIDE

Prenatal sex selection and female infanticide are not practices known in Australia.

The *Children, Australia: A Social Report 1999* shows that there were 4.7 million children aged 0-17 years in Australia and that males slightly outnumbered females in June 1997. The child population comprised 2,409,200 males (51%) and 2,289,800 females (49%). The greater number of male than female children reflects the slightly greater number of male births in Australia.

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH EDUCATION

Australian governments provide funding for sexual and reproductive health education to young women through community education and school based education campaigns. In general, most family planning organisations provide free, special services for adolescents, and some have special centres for young people.

See also:

- *C: Women and Health* for details on the National Women's Health Policy and Programme and family planning.

EATING DISORDERS

Under the *National Mental Health Strategy*, the Australian Government

provides funding for the development and implementation of the *National Community Awareness Programme*, which was launched in April 1995. Outcomes of the programme include advertising (television, cinema and posters) and a number of mental health information leaflets on specific disorders including a leaflet titled *What is an eating disorder?*

INFORMATION

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is currently developing indicators of the well-being of children. One of the tasks of this project has been to examine existing data in current ABS and non-ABS collections, with a view to improving the quality and range of data available on families and children.

In April 1997, the ABS conducted a survey on family characteristics and the publication *Family Characteristics Australia* was released in April 1998. A Social Report was published in 1998 as part of Australia's reporting obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The *Health of Young Australians*, a national health policy for children and young people, has identified the need for regular monitoring of the health of children and young people, complemented by research targeting priority issues. The *National Health Plan for Young Australians* (1995)

nominates the development of an agreed national data set as a key priority for maintaining and improving the health of young children and young people.

See also:

The 'Research' section in *C: Women and Health*.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

6. *Eliminate the economic exploitation of child labour and protect young girls at work.*

Pregnant adolescent workers

The Australian Government funded research on the experiences and barriers facing pregnant adolescents. The study found that teenagers have limited knowledge about discrimination and the law and that some employers fail to provide them with information on their maternity entitlements.

The Australian Government's inquiry into pregnancy and work included an examination of the experiences and barriers facing pregnant adolescent workers.

See also:

- The 'International Aid' section below for details on initiatives to protect exploited child workers.
- *H: Human Rights of Women* for more details on the Pregnancy and Work Inquiry.

- The 'Children and Armed Conflict' section in *E: Women and Armed Conflict*.

- Research Section in *F: Women and the Economy* for more details on research regarding barriers to employment for pregnant and parenting adolescents.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

7. *Eradicate violence against the girl child.*

Australia condemns actions that violate the human rights of children, and has criminalised physical and sexual violence against the girl child. Australia also abhors the practice of female genital mutilation, which is regarded as a form of violence against women.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The *National Campaign Against Violence and Crime* initiative aims to identify and promote ways of preventing crime and fear of crime in Australian communities. Domestic violence and youth are two of the main priority areas. A wide range of research and practice based projects have been funded which focus specifically on adolescents and cover issues affecting girls and young women. The following materials have been produced and distributed widely, free of charge: *Working with adolescents to prevent domestic*

violence – rural town model; Working with adolescents to prevent domestic violence in Indigenous communities; Homeless youth; Early intervention; Young people's attitudes towards domestic violence. In addition, a website has been established which contains a register of nearly 100 domestic and general violence prevention initiatives for adolescents.

See also:

- *D: Violence against Women.*

SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN

Child Protection Australia 1997-98, a report published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, indicates that nearly three times as many girls as boys were the subject of substantiated reports of sexual abuse.

The Australian Government considers that strategies aimed at combating child sexual abuse must reflect the fact that the majority of offenders are heterosexual males who are immediate family members (including 'step' members) or close relatives.

See also:

- The 'Sexual assault and other forms of violence against women' and 'Sexual slavery and servitude' sections in *D: Violence against Women.*
- *I: Human Rights of Women* for details on measures to combat child sex tourism and trafficking.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

8. *Promote the girl child's awareness of and participation in social, economic and political life.*

GIRLS IN SPORT

In September 1999, the Australian Government announced an initiative to promote female participation in sport, the *National Policy on Women and Girls in Sport, Recreation and Physical Activity 1999-2002*. The policy is aimed at broadening the base of national participation by targeting females across a range of practices and making sport more responsive to female values and perspectives.

The policy encourages schools to allow single-sex competition until such time as there is substantial research evidence to suggest that girls will not be disadvantaged in mixed-sex contests. The policy also advocates programmes for less skilled girls entering high school and more sensitivity towards the cultural differences of girls from non-English speaking backgrounds. Sports venues that cater for women and include child care attract more government funding under the policy.

The policy also calls for greater recognition and portrayal of women's sport in the media and suggests the development of a register of suitable

sportswomen and girls available to participate in media activities.

See also:

- *B: Education and Training* for details on the *Discovering democracy* initiative.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

9. Strengthen the role of the family in improving the status of the girl child.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Strengthening and supporting families is a paramount priority for the Australian Government, in recognition of the contribution families make in their supporting, educating and nurturing roles for children.

The Australian Government is working cooperatively with State and Territory governments and community organisations to develop a national framework, the *National Families Strategy*, to support and strengthen families. The Strategy will draw together and better link existing programmes across all levels of government and work closely with the community and business sectors. It will build on government initiatives to improve the quality of life for families and children at home and in the general community, including support for parents in their parenting role,

assistance for disadvantaged families and children at risk and increased community awareness of the consequences of child abuse and neglect.

See also:

The *JET Programme* and 'Family assistance' sections in *A: Women and Poverty*.

CHILDREN'S CONTACT SERVICES

The Australian Government has provided around \$16 million over four years to establish new children's supervised contact services in urban and regional centres. An additional 10,000 families will be assisted to better manage child contact difficulties through the establishment of a further 25 children's contact services. These services provide practical assistance where parents need skills to ensure the best interests of their children are met and to improve family relationships.

MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIP SUPPORT

The Australian Government is committed to strengthening and supporting families and nurturing relationships through education and prevention. A total of \$16.5 million will be provided for marriage and relationship education services and new support networks and

services specifically for men. Major initiatives include:

- services to assist families, couples and individuals to enhance their family relationships will be funded with \$6 million over three years. This will build on the RELATE campaign launched in February 1999 which provides information about the value and availability of marriage and relationship education; and
- \$9 million will be provided over three years to further assist men in their family relationships – this recognises the importance to women of positive and quality relationships with their partners and the value of relationship education in preventing family breakdown.

See also:

- The 'Responses to perpetrators of domestic violence against women' section in *D: Violence against Women*.
- Strategic Objective 3 above for details on youth initiatives.

INTERNATIONAL AID

Australia's development assistance programme promotes activities which address discrimination against the girl child and has provided ongoing funding to protect child labourers, sexually prostituted children and street children. Education projects address

gender biased curricula and encourage enrolment of girls where indicators show disparities against enrolment of girls.

Examples of projects which consider the girl child include:

- in partnership with World Vision Australia, support for the establishment of a drop in centre for street girl children in Dhaka;
- prior to the 1997 ILO Conference on Child Labour, Australia supported a Child Labour Forum Regional Conference in Bangkok to develop country and regional plans for the identification and rescue of children in intolerable situations and to improve data collection and research.

See also:

- The 'International aid' section in *D: Violence Against Women*

EXAMPLES OF STATE AND TERRITORY INITIATIVES

NEW SOUTH WALES

The NSW Young Mothers Programme encourages schools to assist young mothers to remain in education.

The NSW Government has established the following initiatives:

- *Community Benefit Fund* included a grant of \$20,000 during 1997-98 to assist in the establishment of physical activity opportunities for girls;
- \$15,000 (1997) for the *Daily Physical Activity* project for girls in detention;
- *SR-Active Girls Project* (1997) - around \$75,000 was allocated to school visits and activity programme for girls using female role models; and
- *Gender Issues and Physical Activity Project* (1998) provided funding of \$75,000 to increase the proportion of girls engaging in physical activity, including research into the effectiveness of such programmes.

VICTORIA

The Victorian Government will introduce a range of initiatives to encourage the participation of girls in sport and recreation which aim to increase the low fundamental skill level of girls, provide female role models, introduce cricket and soccer for girls within the schools sporting calendar, and develop best practice action plans.

A Gender Education Unit has been established in the Office of Schools. The major focus of this Unit will be the review of current provision of gender education, and the development of policy advice and curriculum strategies to support schools to provide gender equity in education.

A Ministerial Consultative Committee has been established to review the progress for women and girls in education and to provide future directions and funding requirements for the education of women and girls in Victorian Schools.

See also

- 'Family assistance' in *A: Women and Poverty*
- *B: Education and Training* for details on school education
- *C: Women and Health*

OBSTACLES AND LEARNING POINTS

CONCERNS OF WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY

- Women are concerned that governments should provide more adequate programmes and support in alleviating the effects of poverty on families. There needs to be more support for families in their crucial role of protecting the well-being of the girl child.
- There is concern about provision of adequate funding to address the increasing incidence of sexual abuse of the girl child. More active efforts are needed to tackle abuse both in the home and in relation to child prostitution and sex trafficking in the Asia Pacific Region.

- There need to be programmes to address the health of the girl child, particularly in relation to mental health issues, smoking and substance abuse.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

The availability of controversial material on girls on the Internet, covering pornography, and degrading and violent portrayals of girls and young women, is an ongoing challenge facing all governments around the world.

FUTURE COMMITMENTS

Future commitments for women are incorporated above.

In the Australian Government system, new funding commitments are customarily announced in the annual Federal Budget. Additional commitments may be publicly announced in the context of the election platform or at other occasions.

The Australian Government's future budget commitments for women are comprehensively outlined in *Delivering on our Commitments for Women*, the Budget Ministerial Statement on Women from the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women. A copy of this statement has been provided in response to Part 2 (Financial and Institutional measures).

