

Consideration of Australia's Combined 4th and 5th Report by the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

30 January 2006

Opening Statement

Madam Chair, distinguished members of the Committee.

It is a pleasure to meet with you today to discuss Australia's progress in implementing our commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Australia takes our obligations under the Convention very seriously, and our delegation will do our best to answer your questions today.

I would like to introduce the members of the Australian delegation. My name is Kerry Flanagan. I head the Australian Government Office for Women. Mr Matt Minogue is Assistant Secretary of the Human Rights Branch in the Attorney-General's Department. Mr Vincent Giuca is the Regional Director of our Department of Immigration. Ms Gabrielle Burrell is from the Office for Women.

Consultation and Coordination

I would like to explain a little about the context of Australia's system of government as this fundamentally affects how we interact with and deliver services to Australian women.

Australia has a federal constitutional system in which legislative, executive and judicial powers are shared or distributed between the national government, six state governments, and two internal self-governing territories. This means that nine governments in Australia share responsibility for issues in which the Committee will take a close interest in today.

At the national government level, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women's Issues, the Honourable Julie Bishop MP, is a Cabinet Minister, which ensures that potential impacts on women are taken into account when Government considers key policy issues.

My office is currently resourced at over AUS\$98 million over four years – more than it has ever had before – and we have around 50 staff. We are the central point of advice on the impact of policies and programmes on women for the whole of national government. We encourage all ministries at the national government level to think about women when they are designing policies and implementing programmes, so there is an even greater range of effort applied to women's issues. There are also women's offices in every state and territory government, with whom we work closely.

Our work is complemented by the work of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner within the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

and the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, both of which have legislative mandates.

The Australian Government primarily consults with civil society on issues affecting women through four government-funded National Secretariats that coordinate over 60 Australian national women's organisations. The Attorney-General and the Minister for Foreign Affairs conduct regular consultation forums on human rights, and my office participates in these.

Significant developments since lodgement of the report in 2003

The Australian Government recognises the need for policy and programme development to be well informed through easy access to quality sex-disaggregated data. The Australian Government Bureau of Statistics prepares statistical data on Australian women, and the Office for Women manages an online database and publications to ensure public access to wide-ranging statistical data about women in Australia. I have brought along copies of our current statistical publication for the committee's reference.

I would now like to set out a few of the significant developments for women in Australia since the 4th and 5th combined report was lodged with the Committee in December 2003.

Women's Health

The details of programmes and statistics for Australian women's health are addressed in the pre-sessional questions. We are particularly pleased to report of the success of the *National Cervical Screening Programme*, established in 1991. Since the programme commenced, the incidence of cervical cancer has fallen by over 30% and mortality from cervical cancer has fallen by over 50%.

We acknowledge that despite very good health outcomes for Australian women in general, Indigenous women's health is still an area of concern. The Government is providing funding to improve Indigenous people's access to comprehensive primary health care services. For example, efforts to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity among Indigenous women have included the establishment of culturally appropriate prenatal and birthing centres, antenatal care programmes, the training of Indigenous health workers, and a network of community-controlled primary health care services at the local level.

Australia is a large country. It is around the size of the United States or Europe, but with a population of 20 million living mainly in our larger cities on the eastern coastline. This results in particular service delivery challenges for our women living in rural and remote areas.

In 2004-05, the *Rural Women's General Practitioner Service* provided female General Practitioner consultations to 15,817 patients in rural and remote areas. In January 2005 the Australian public health insurance system introduced rebates for practice nurses in rural areas to undertake pap smears on behalf of a General Practitioner, and the Australian Government is

consulting with medical and nursing groups about how this system might be expanded to include other preventive health checks for women in rural areas.

Women's education and training

The Australian Government sees education and training as a key means of improving the economic status of women and helping women to achieve their goals and widen their life choices. Australian women and girls continue their strong performance and participation in education and training.

Since the mid 1970s, girls have been more likely than boys to continue through secondary school to the uppermost level of schooling. By 2003, 81 per cent of girls completed the final year of secondary school, compared to 70 per cent of boys.

Women account for 54.4 per cent of all higher education students. Importantly, women are now participating in the highest levels of education at much more equal rates. In the first semester of 2004, women accounted for 46 per cent of all students beginning a Masters course, and 49 per cent of those undertaking a doctorate.

The number of women in Australia undertaking traditionally male areas of study such as law and medicine has increased in recent years. Australia also has a scheme to encourage women into non-traditional trades as apprentices. However, women continue to be under represented in some fields of study, such as engineering, information technology and architecture.

Women's employment

The Australian Government provides legislative protection to enable women's full participation in the workforce and to assist employees in balancing their work and family responsibilities.

The proportion of women aged 15 years and over in paid work has increased from 49.6 per cent in 1996 to 54 per cent in March 2005. Women's wages have also increased. Women's earnings as a proportion of men's have risen from 83.2 per cent in February 1996 to 85.1 per cent today.

The Government is making a substantial investment of AUS\$3.6 billion over four years to reform our social assistance system. Changes to income support arrangements and employment services will encourage and support those capable of working to become less dependent on welfare by participating in the workforce on at least a part-time basis once their children have reached school age. There will be more practical support to parents to help them prepare for employment and to assist with childcare, including over 85,000 new child care places.

Women and their families

A broad range of family assistance and childcare benefits are available to all families in Australia, predominantly paid to mothers as the primary carers. Australia has a non-contributory social assistance system paid through the

taxation system which is means tested to limit expenditure to those with high incomes.

When combined with the other forms of family assistance, Australia has a very generous system of family support. Almost all Australian families with dependent children, about 2.1 million of them, receive family assistance. A low-income family with two children may be entitled to as much as AUS\$14,300 in Family Tax Benefit a year.

The Australian Government expends considerable resources on supporting families with the cost of childcare, and expects to spend around \$8.4 billion over the next four years.

Women and families has also been a key focus of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. In February 2005 the Sex Discrimination Commissioner launched *Striking the Balance: Women, men, work and family*. The project aims to examine family responsibilities and paid work, and will report in early 2006.

Women in Retirement and Later Years

Many payments are available to defined groups, such as the aged, and are often means tested to ensure that payments are targeted to those that most need them. This model ensures that those on low incomes, or in vulnerable circumstances - many of them women - receive the greatest assistance.

For example, the Australian Government has continued to ensure that the basic single rate of retirement pension is at least 25 per cent of the male average weekly earnings, which was passed by legislation in 1997. As at September 2005, there were 1,127,733 female age pensioners, around 60% of all age pensioners, benefiting from this measure.

Australia not only has a universally available means tested basic pension for all women over the age of 63 (rising to 65 in 2013), but also a mandatory contributory superannuation system to further improve people's retirement incomes.

Seventy-two per cent of all people receiving aged care are women. Aged care places have been increased and aged care packages are also available which can be tailored and delivered to those still residing in their own homes and neighbourhoods.

Seventy per cent of primary carers in Australia are women and our governments recognise the important role they play in this respect. We are working to give carers better choice and access to the respite care that best meets their needs, and have implemented measures such as a one-off bonus payment, extending carer allowance, providing assistance to young carers and respite for carers over 70 years of age.

Women's Leadership, Participation and Development

Madam Chair, all Australian governments are strongly committed to building women's leadership and participation in all parts of Australian life.

Clear improvements in leadership and participation of women in Australia's government are evident. The number of women in Australia's parliaments is the highest it has ever been, ranging between 27 and 43 per cent, and including six Indigenous women. Although we are yet to have a female Prime Minister, in recent years four of our state and territory governments have been led by women and three have had women opposition leaders.

Twenty-nine percent of the appointments made to the Federal Judiciary since 1996 have been women.

In September 2005 Women Ministers agreed to a National Strategy to Increase the Participation of Women on Boards. Women hold 32 per cent of Commonwealth controlled positions on Australian Government Boards and around 30 per cent of senior executive service positions in the public service across most Australian governments. There is still a much longer way to go in increasing the number of women on private sector boards. At the moment, women hold only around eight per cent of Board Directorships in the top 200 companies listed on the Australian Stock Exchange and around ten per cent of private sector executive management positions.

Women's Safety

Australia has demonstrated a strong commitment to preventing, reducing and responding to domestic violence. Women's ministers and their advisers from all Australian governments focus on this issue at their regular meetings. All governments have continued to implement measures to address this issue.

As outlined in the response to issues raised in the pre-sessional questions the successful national media campaign, *Violence Against Women. Australia Says NO* promoted community awareness of domestic violence during 2004 and 2005, with over 60,700 calls made to a national 24 hour helpline from victims, observers and perpetrators of domestic violence.

Australia is committed to providing support and assistance to victims who choose to leave violent relationships and takes the problem of their resulting homelessness seriously. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare recently reported that agencies continue to provide effective assistance to women and children escaping domestic violence. The new *Supported Accommodation Assistance Programme* agreement between Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments will increase the options for homeless people including those escaping family violence situations. State governments have introduced a range of measures, such as greater police power to remove the perpetrator from the home.

We acknowledge the particular problem of domestic violence in our Indigenous communities. Both the *Family Violence Partnership Programme* and the Legal Services units aim to work in partnership with state and territory governments and Indigenous communities to address Indigenous family violence and child abuse. Under the *Family Violence Partnership Programme*, ten projects, valued at over AUS\$12 million have been announced and are currently running across Australia, and a number of other projects are under consideration. The number of Family Violence Prevention and Legal Service units has doubled from 13 in 2003 to 26 in 2005. These units are community-

controlled justice, advisory and referral centres for victims of family violence. The services provide assistance and ongoing support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, predominantly women, who are the victims of family violence and sexual assault.

In Australia, prostitution is regulated by our state and territory governments. The state government of New South Wales points out that their decision to decriminalise prostitution has reduced the exploitation of women previously working for illegal and organised crime syndicates, and women working in the sex industry there now have access to health services and Occupational Health and Safety legislative provisions. Sex Workers Outreach Programmes operating in some states provide advice on issues such as legislation, occupational health and safety, and protection against sexually transmitted diseases. They also link sex workers interested in moving out of the industry with further education courses to assist them with gaining the skills and opportunities required to change their occupation.

Australia is strongly committed to eradicating trafficking and providing support to victims of trafficking. The *National Action Plan to Eradicate Trafficking in Persons* is a AUS\$20 million package of measures to address prevention, detection and investigation, criminal prosecution, victim support and rehabilitation. Implementing this plan involves a coordinated effort by a number of government agencies at the national level, as well as a strong working relationship with agencies in state and local governments, such as the police.

Australia is proactively investigating people trafficking offences. Between 1999 and January 2006, the Australian Federal Police have undertaken over 100 investigations into sexual servitude and slavery related offences, and 14 alleged offenders have been charged, with a number of matters still before the courts.

Australia has in place a comprehensive programme of support for suspected victims of trafficking who are willing to assist with investigations. Qualified social workers tailor the support to meet each individual victim's needs. The service provider has recently undergone independent evaluation and a further contract has been granted on that basis.

Victims of trafficking who have assisted with an investigation or prosecution may be eligible for a Witness Protection Visa to remain in Australia if they would be in danger if they return home. Where a suspected victim is unable or unwilling to assist with investigations, in accordance with Article 8 of the UN Trafficking Protocol they are assisted in returning to their home country. Australia provides return and reintegration assistance to victims returning to Thailand, which is our most common source country, and is investigating opportunities to expand this assistance to other source countries in South East Asia.

The Australian Government is also working together with other countries in our region to address trafficking beyond Australia's shores. Australia has appointed an Ambassador for People Smuggling Issues who is responsible for high-level advocacy of Australia's interests in promoting effective and practical international cooperation to combat people smuggling and trafficking

in persons, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. We support activities in South East Asian 'source countries' to combat trafficking and play an active role in regional dialogues.

Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has also been active in the area of anti-trafficking, sponsoring conferences and dialogue with human rights machineries in the Asia Pacific region.

Immigration

Madam Chair, as outlined in the pre-sessional questions, the Australian Government administers a humanitarian migration programme, which in 2005-2006 will provide 13,000 places for people subject to persecution or substantial discrimination amounting to a gross violation of human rights. Women are well represented in the humanitarian migration programme, reflecting the fact that more than half of the worlds' refugees are women and children. As at March 2005, 48 per cent of visas granted in 2004-2005 under Australia's humanitarian migration programme were to women and girls.

Promoting the Diversity of Australian Women

Almost one quarter of the Australian population was born overseas, and a quarter of the population born in Australia has at least one overseas-born parent. The diversity of Australians' countries of birth has increased substantially over the years. With such statistics, Australia cannot afford to harbour racism.

Ensuring that the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse women are met within mainstream government policies and programmes is important. Information about these government policies and programmes were detailed in the pre-sessional questions.

The Australian Government has released a policy statement *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity*, which sets strategic directions for the period 2003-2006. A comprehensive evaluation of multicultural programmes is being undertaken and a new policy document is expected to be released in mid-2006.

Addressing racism towards Muslim Australians has been a recent focus for us. In 2003 our Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission consulted with the Muslim community to find out about the nature and extent of racism being experienced and to develop strategies to address this, and a number of the recommendations that came out of this work were taken up by the government.

In 2005, following a meeting between the Prime Minister and Muslim community leaders, a Muslim Community Reference Group and seven sub-groups have been established. One of the sub-groups considers issues relating to women. A draft National Plan of Action, involving all levels of government in Australia, is currently being formulated to guide effort in tackling emerging issues.

Changes to machinery for Indigenous Australians

I would like to advise you of changes to national machinery for Indigenous Australians since our last report to CEDAW. Australia acknowledges that our Indigenous people continue to be disadvantaged and we continue to work towards achieving desired outcomes.

Since July 2004 Australia has put in place new structures to improve the way services are provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

A Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs, which includes our minister provides leadership and strategic direction at the national level, advised by heads of ministries and a National Indigenous Council, consisting of Indigenous Australians chosen for their expertise across a range of policy areas. There are five women on the council, including the Chair.

Australia's national Indigenous programmes are now administered by the relevant mainstream agencies across government, and this is coordinated and monitored by an Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia, comprising the leaders of our national, state, territory and local governments. Its role is to initiate, develop and monitor the implementation of policy reforms that are of national significance and which require cooperative action by Australian governments, including Indigenous issues.

In partnership with local indigenous communities in eight localities across Australia, governments are working together to trial new ways of working with indigenous communities. These trial sites are an important opportunity to pursue innovation and flexibility in government policy, programmes and service delivery to respond to community-identified issues and directions, identify what works, what does not work and to make those lessons available more broadly.

National, state and territory ministers consider Indigenous issues relevant to their portfolio at their regular meetings. For example the Australian women's ministers meet annually with a gathering of Indigenous women from around Australia to hear their concerns directly. This year and next year the ministers and Indigenous representatives have decided to maintain a focus on safety, given the fundamental impact that violence is having on women in Indigenous communities.

The committee may be interested to know that there are approximately 410,000 people in Australia who identify themselves as Indigenous, around 2% of our total population. 30% of Indigenous people live in major cities, 20% in inner regional areas, and 23% in outer regional areas, while 9% live in remote areas and 18% in very remote areas.

International Aid

Australia's international aid programme places considerable emphasis on ensuring that women and men should have equal access to resources and decision making by mainstreaming gender into all aid related activities.

Australia's Agency for International Development, is undertaking a review of gender mainstreaming across the agency, which will feed in to the update of its Gender and Development Policy in 2006. A White Paper outlining a medium-term strategic framework for Australia's aid programme will be tabled in Parliament in early 2006.

International Forums

Australia is an active participant in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. In 2005, we reaffirmed the Beijing Platform for Action along with other participants. In 2004 we sponsored an Australian expert, Dr Michael Flood, to present a paper to CSW on the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality.

The Australian Government is hosting the meeting of members of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 2007. As part of this, the Australian Government will host the two APEC gender forums – the Gender Focal Point Network and the Women's Leaders Network. These two forums are focussed on promoting women's involvement in regional economies, trade and entrepreneurship.

Reservations and Optional Protocol

At this time, Australia retains its reservations with regard to paid maternity leave and women in direct combat roles, and does not intend to sign the Optional Protocol to CEDAW.

Regardless of Australia's reservation with regard to paid maternity leave, Australia has a unique and comparatively generous system in place. Employees with 12 months continuous service with their employer are entitled through legislated provisions to a minimum of 52 weeks of shared unpaid parental leave following the birth of their child. The latest data shows that 45 per cent of female employees are also paid maternity leave by their workplace.

In addition, the national government has introduced a universal maternity payment to help with the costs of a new baby. This payment is currently a little over AUS\$3,000, rising progressively to AUS\$5,000 in 2008.

Engagement with the Committee

I would like to record our sincere appreciation to the Committee for the pre-session questions, which helped us as a guide to issues of particular interest to you. My delegation and I will be pleased to respond to these and any other issues in more detail when we take questions.

Following receipt of the Committee's concluding comments, the Office for Women will disseminate the recommendations within our national, state and territory governments for consideration and investigation. We will also consult with civil society regarding the concluding comments and how they might be taken forward.

Australia is pleased that the need for reform of the human rights treaty body system has been recognised at the highest levels of the UN. As Committee members will be aware, Australia has been very active, both here and in Geneva, in support of efforts to find practical ways to streamline the treaty body system.

With particular regard to the operation of the CEDAW committee, we commend Committee members for their proactive approach to improving and streamlining methods of work. Innovations such as imposing page limits on country reports, providing countries with lists of issues in advance of their appearances and the initiative outlined at UNGA60 to reduce the time between countries submitting their reports and having them considered by the Committee all contribute to a more efficient, more focused and thereby more effective interaction with States.

We propose to submit Australia's next periodic report in 2008. This report would be a combined 6th and 7th report, which would bring us up to date with the timeline for our reporting requirements under CEDAW.

Conclusion

Madam Chair, distinguished members of the Committee.

Australia is a strong and vibrant democracy, with a dynamic and diverse civil society, and a robust range of legal and administrative checks and balances.

The United Nations Development Program Human Development Report 2005 ranked Australia second in the world in its *Gender Related Development Index* and seventh in the world in its *Gender Empowerment Measure*.

Australia was also ranked tenth in the world in the World Economic Forum's 2005 study titled *Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap*.

We take pride in the success of our society to advance the status of women and work to meet the challenges that remain.

We welcome your views and in this regard we look forward to a constructive dialogue with the Committee today.

Thank you.