

CEDAW Opening Statement

Madam Chair, distinguished members of the Committee.

Before I begin I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners on whose land we meet today and pay my respects to elders past and present.

It is a great pleasure to meet with you today, to engage in a constructive dialogue about Australia's implementation of the **United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.**

Being here, I am humbled by the great Australian women who have come before me, trailblazers like feminist and activist, Jessie Street.

90 years ago Jessie Street came to this very building to advocate for Australian women's economic independence as a key to their advancement: the right for women to divorce, women's fair custody of their children, birth control for women, equal pay for women and equal inclusion of Aboriginal women in Australian society.

She understood the power of working with women throughout the world. Among her many accomplishments, Jessie Street championed the creation of the Commission on the Status of Women as a permanent United Nations body to deal with women's rights.

We're proud she did.

Australia has continued its meaningful engagement in international fora. In particular, we demonstrate our commitment and leadership on gender equality at home and abroad.

As a long-standing signatory to CEDAW, current member of the Human Rights Council, and member of the Commission on the Status of Women starting next year, Australia places great importance on meeting our obligations under the Convention, and our delegation will do our best to answer your questions today.

Australia's membership of the Commission on the Status of Women is a testament to our commitment to the full and equal realisation of women and girls' human rights, to securing substantive gender equality and the empowerment of diverse women socially, politically and economically.

I'm Trish Bergin, Head of the Office for Women in the Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. I am ably joined today by the following members of the Australian Delegation:

- **Ms Sally Mansfield**, Ambassador, Australian Permanent Mission to the Office of the United Nations
- **Ms Rebecca Lannen**, Assistant Secretary, Regional Network, Indigenous Affairs Group in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
- **Ms Chantelle Stratford**, Branch Manager of Family Safety in the Department of Social Services
- **Ms Margaret Kidd**, Minister Counsellor – Australian delegation to the OECD and ILO
- **Ms Amy Haddad**, Assistant Secretary of the Gender Equality Branch at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- **Mr Steve McGlynn**, Assistant Secretary of the Legal Division at the Department of Home Affairs

I would like to put into context Australia's system of government as this fundamentally affects how each level of Government interacts with Australian women.

Australia is a federation, composed of a Federal Government cooperating with six state and two territory governments, via the Council of Australian Governments. While the Federal Government is the State Party to this Convention, state and territory governments share responsibility for implementing our obligations. All Australian jurisdictions, ministers and departments share responsibility for the development and advancement of women.

This responsibility involves considering the needs of different women, particularly those who face multiple barriers to full participation in work and community life.

We consulted the states and territories in preparing our 8th Periodic Report and Reply to the List of Issues for this appearance. We will endeavour to address all issues raised here, regardless of the level of government.

As delegation head, I will draw on the expertise of my fellow delegates: colleagues from across the Federal Government. The breadth of our delegation demonstrates our commitment to full participation in this Interactive Dialogue before the Committee today.

Federally, the Office for Women advances gender equality outcomes in Australia. The Office is situated in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

Consistent with the role of other areas within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Office for Women works with departments and agencies across government to ensure that their policies and programs support overarching government priorities, including those associated with gender equality.

Each state and territory government also has dedicated women's policy offices which work to enhance the status of women.

The work of the Office for Women is complemented by the work of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner within the Australian Human Rights Commission and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

The Australian Government has set three priorities for gender equality. These are to strengthen women's economic security; support more women into leadership positions; and to ensure that women and their children are safe from violence.

Our appearance today is an opportunity to reflect on Australia's progress to date and set priorities for the future.

Let me now address the challenges faced by Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women play pivotal leadership roles in their families, through their communities, and as contributors to the Australian economy.

Like many other countries, Australia's Indigenous women and girls often have different life pathways to those followed by many non-Indigenous women, and take on caring responsibilities at a younger age, which can then interrupt education and impact on participation in employment throughout their lives.

Good education and health services, and financial security can provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with more control over their lives,

empowering women by reducing their level of disadvantage and supporting positive outcomes for their families and communities.

Over the past 10 years, we have made inroads to better support young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to attain a Year 12 qualification and enrol in higher education, with the greatest increases seen for young women. Female Indigenous students have a higher rate of school attendance, and they outperform Indigenous boys in literacy, maths and science.

In May 2017, the Australian Government announced the release of the 50th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum Education Package. The package includes funding towards a girls' Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics Academy and overall provides \$41 million to go to activities specific to women and girls,

The Australian Government is exploring holistic and practical ways to improve the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls through the national *Women's Voices* project. The project is being led by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner June Oscar, and includes an extensive consultation process over **2018**.

We know that businesses do better when women have leadership roles within them, which is why our recently launched Indigenous Business Sector Strategy was designed with increasing women's participation firmly in mind.

An empowerment and strengths-based approach will complement the Government's work to reduce family and domestic violence, improve outcomes for women and communities, and almost certainly get traction to Close the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage.

All of Australia's Closing the Gap targets to address Indigenous disadvantage are interconnected. Progress in one area helps progress to be made in others. For instance, improving education standards helps to increase employment rates and levels of health. And community safety is fundamental to ensuring girls attend school and women maintain employment.

Although the Australian Government values and aims to empower women and girls, it acknowledges that the annual Closing the Gap reports have a narrow focus on targets. In her February **2017** visit to Australia, the Special Rapporteur for Violence Against Women noted that the Closing the Gap report does not apply a gender lens.

With the exception of life expectancy, the Closing the Gap targets set in **2008** are not gender disaggregated. However, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework Reports and the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Reports have published gender data and comprehensive analysis over many years.

The Federal Government is currently working with State and Territory Governments to refresh the Closing the Gap agenda, with the view to agree a new framework, targets and performance indicators by October **2018**. Community consultations are currently underway to explore current target areas and development of new target areas.

Let me now address the challenge of women's safety.

The Australian Government is firm in its view that domestic and family violence is unacceptable and cannot be tolerated.

Violence against women and girls is not only a violation of their human rights but is also a barrier to full participation in their communities and economies.

Eliminating violence against women and girls requires co-ordinated multi-sectoral approaches combined with attitudinal changes within every community, every place of work and political system, **with** women and girls' safety as a priority.

Australia's approach to addressing domestic and family violence is illustrative of federalism in practice.

Since Australia's last CEDAW appearance, Australia has acted on the recommendation of this Committee to continue our efforts to tackle the persistent problem of violence against women.

I am pleased to update this Committee on the endorsement, in February **2011**, by the Council of Australian Governments, of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022.

The National Plan is being delivered over 12 years through a series of four three-year action plans.

Each plan builds upon and responds to issues identified during the implementation of the previous plan.

This allows the Australian Government to identify what works and what doesn't work, to benefit from research as it becomes available, and to consult with civil society, States and Territories, women and children, about what they think needs improvement.

It is the framework document for leading action on the women's safety agenda.

The National Plan sets out an ambitious framework for action. It requires governments to better support women and their children who have experienced violence, or are at risk of experiencing violence.

It requires governments to hold perpetrators to account for their actions.

And it requires all Australians to prevent violence from occurring in the first place.

The Third Action Plan (covering the period 2016 to 2019), under the National Plan, responds to findings that greater leadership was required to challenge gender inequality and transform community attitudes.

The Third Action Plan promotes community involvement in challenging discrimination and gender stereotyping.

The Third Action Plan builds positive attitudes, beliefs and social norms to confront controlling, aggressive and ultimately violent behaviour.

And the the Third Action Plan advances gender equality.

To ensure the views and experiences of Australians of diverse needs were included in the Third Action Plan, the Department of Social Services held 16 workshops and roundtables with over 400 stakeholders from non-government organisations, from academia and from business.

- Consultation for the Third Action Plan included specific workshops on the needs and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and women with disability.

Early planning has begun to develop the Fourth Action Plan (covering the period 2019-2022). As with previous plans, Government will consult broadly in its development.

In leading the development of the Fourth Action Plan, the Office for Women and the Department of Social Services, will engage with colleagues across the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments, stakeholders across the domestic and family violence sector, and victim survivors.

- Stakeholder consultations will commence later this year, with the aim of implementing the Fourth Action Plan from **2019**.

Australia acknowledges that domestic, family and sexual violence disproportionately affects particular cohorts of women, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, migrant and refugee women, and women with disability. These cohorts will be prioritised in the Fourth Action Plan.

Since the National Plan has been put in place, the Commonwealth has invested over \$676 million to address family violence. This is complemented

by a significant state and territory investment which exceeds \$4 billion in the past three years.

The most recent Federal Budget included an additional \$54 million for women's safety initiatives, including \$11.5 million for 1800 RESPECT telephone counselling service, \$6.7 million for DV-alert, \$14.2 million for the Office of the eSafety Commissioner to help make cyberspace safe for women, and \$22 million to combat elder abuse.

The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, noted with appreciation on her mission to Australia the newly created role of eSafety Commissioner in Australia, and eSafety Women, an Australian platform that provides valuable resources to women and girls to manage their online engagement. Australia is proud to share with other interested States this best practice model of providing support in dealing with online harassment and abuse.

At our last appearance, this Committee recommended that Australia take appropriate legislative measures to criminalise, prosecute and respond to domestic violence.

The Australian Government is committed to taking action to prevent family violence and abuse, and to improving the protections offered through the family law system.

Effectively responding to family violence and child abuse is a responsibility shared by federal, state and territory governments. The states and territories have responsibility for investigating and responding to child protection issues, as well as for the majority of laws related to family violence.

In May last year, senior justice officials formed the Council of Attorneys-General Family Violence Working Group. This group represents all federal, state and territory governments, and is tasked with developing measures to improve the interaction between the family law, child protection and family violence systems.

In November last year, the National Domestic Violence Order Scheme took effect. Domestic violence orders are now automatically recognised and enforceable in all Australian jurisdictions.

The scheme represents a significant step towards further protecting and empowering families as they build new lives, safe and free from violence.

Also at our last appearance, this Committee urged Australia to adopt measures to combat sexual harassment in the workplace.

Last month, the Australian Government announced its support for practical action to address sexual harassment, contributing \$500,000 towards the Australian Human Rights Commission's Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in the Workplace to be led by Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins.

This inquiry will consider the drivers of sexual harassment in the workplace, the use of technology and social media, and the legal framework, as well as existing practices to inform practical recommendations that will assist Australian workplaces deal with this sensitive and difficult issue.

Sexual harassment continues to pervade Australian workplaces. One in four women and one in six men aged 15 years and older have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace in the past five years.

This Inquiry will be a positive and meaningful step forward in reducing sexual harassment at work and ensuring that, where it does occur, it is dealt with carefully and appropriately.

Let me now turn to the challenge of women's economic security.

The importance of women's economic empowerment cannot be underestimated and must be addressed on several fronts.

The barriers to economic participation are not the same for all Australian women and girls. Women and girls from rural, regional and remote settings often face greater social and economic marginalisation which can be caused by intersecting and compounding forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Other cohorts of women also face significant barriers to workforce participation.

We know there is a gender pay gap favouring men in every industry and occupational level.

The Australian Government is taking practical steps to address drivers of the gender pay gap, such as workforce participation. However, there is no single solution and everyone - business, government and the community - must take action on this issue.

The Federal Government's focus on boosting women's participation helps women to earn higher income, and as a result, helps to increase their retirement incomes.

Towards 2025: An Australian Government Strategy to boost women's workforce participation addresses five areas that require continued Government action over the next decade.

- First, is ensuring affordable, accessible and flexible child care.
- Second, is improving workplace diversity and flexibility.
- Third, is supporting women to innovate, succeed as entrepreneurs and thrive in jobs of the future.
- Fourth, is strengthening women's economic security.
- And, fifth is enhancing financial incentives to work.

In response to the low rate of women in senior leadership roles we are working with business to increase women's leadership opportunities in the private sector, which is the largest employer of Australian women.

We have seen progress here.

The number of women in directorship positions on ASX200 listed companies has risen in the past five years – from 15.8% to 27.7% of positions on boards being held by women.

The Australian Government is demonstrating best practice for gender balance on boards and leading by example in order to drive change in corporate Australia, in **2015** Australia set a gender diversity target of men and women each holding at least 40% of Australian Government board positions. Australia has since committed to increasing this target to 50% of all Australian Government board positions being held by women, with a minimum of women representing 40% on each individual board.

I am pleased to share with you that as at the end of **2017**, women held 44.5% of Australian Government Board positions.

Many State and Territory governments have similar targets and strategies which are achieving equally promising results.

And on an additional, positive note, I am proud to say that that the Australian Public Service—Australia's federal civil service, with a staff of over 155,000 people, making it one of Australia's largest employers—achieved gender parity this year in its highest ranks. Nine out of 18 heads of Commonwealth agencies are now women.

To eliminate gender inequality we must know the scale and the scope of the challenge. Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Agency is invaluable in this regard.

In **2012**, the Australian Government legislated the Workplace Gender Equality Act. The primary objective of this strengthened legislation is to promote and improve gender equality across Australia's workplaces.

The Act has resulted in the collection of a unique and extensive data set, which effectively represents an annual Census of all private businesses that have 100 or more employees. The latest Workplace Gender Equality Agency data collection covers over 11,000 Australian organisations and captures more than 4 million employees – which equates to approximately 40% of the Australian workforce.

We are now in the fifth year of Australian employers reporting to the Agency under the Act and data shows there is continuing momentum and progress towards gender equality in Australian workplaces.

In addition to collecting and publishing data, the Agency provides innovative approaches to encourage employer action to address workplace gender equality. A great example of this is the Employer of Choice for Gender Equality citation.

The citation commenced in **2014** and encourages, recognises and promotes active commitment to achieving gender equality in Australian workplaces.

This year, a record 120 organisations received the citation.

- They are organisations who have entrenched organisation-wide flexible work and implemented programs to support women into leadership.
- They have tailored parental leave policies to support use by both women and men, and implemented initiatives to attract women into male-dominated roles.
- They have also supported men's caring responsibilities, and undertaken robust analysis and correction of gender pay gaps.

The major building blocks are already in place to promote women's

economic empowerment: Australian women have one of the highest tertiary enrolment rates across the OECD; access to childcare and paid parental leave; and a strong legal and industrial system that supports worker protections and workplace flexibility.

We are deeply committed to supporting all Australian women and girls to gain the knowledge and skills to ensure their economic prosperity.

As June Oscar, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, and recipient of one of Australia's highest honors, the Order of Australia which recognises June's distinguished service to the Indigenous community of Western Australia, particularly through health and social welfare programs, says, "**empower a woman, empower a nation.**"

Australia is working towards this goal.

June is a strong advocate for Indigenous Australian languages, social justice, women's issues, and has worked tirelessly to reduce Fetal Alcohol Spectrum

Disorder. June was a winner of the '100 Women of Influence 2013' in the Social Enterprise and Not For Profit category and in 2015 June received the Menzies School of Health Research Medallion for her work with FASD.

The Office for Women is pleased to have supported civil society in producing its independent shadow reports to Australia's 8th Periodic CEDAW Report.

I hope it will assist you as you evaluate Australia's implementation of the Convention.

The shadow reports provide an opportunity for the women's sector to review the Government's current work to promote equality and also to comment on where we need to focus future efforts.

- We see this in the submissions made by NGOs in preparation for the appearance today.

We value the work of civil society and their contribution in this process and generally. They support the Government to be transparent and accountable.

The Federal Government primarily consults with civil society on issues affecting Australian women through the six government funded National Women's Alliances that represent over 120 Australian women's organisations.

The Alliances are networks of issues-based and sector-based women's groups each with a distinct focus and a strong capacity for networking and advocacy activities.

The role of the Alliances is to engage with women and government to ensure women's issues are represented in decision-making and policy outcomes. The Alliances actively engage with the Federal Government on policy issues as part of a better, more informed and representative dialogue between women and their government.

The Attorney-General and the Minister for Foreign Affairs also conduct regular consultation forums on human rights with NGOs, in which the Office for Women and many women's organisations participate.

The Australian Government also recognises the important role of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner and the Australian Human Rights Commission as the independent statutory authority responsible for monitoring Australia's progress towards gender equality.

Australia believes all governments and communities must support the formal recognition of A-status independent National Human Rights Institutions in promoting women's empowerment and gender equality at the national, regional and international levels.

Madam Chair, distinguished members of the Committee.

We are delighted to be here with you today and I hope this overview and Australia's replies to the List of Issues assist the Committee in considering our Periodic Report.

Since our last appearance we've made key progress.

But there's more to do. We know this.

We welcome the opportunity to learn from your advice and discuss how Australia can achieve better life outcomes for Australian women, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

I thank you for the opportunity to discuss Australia's performance. We are proud to be a part of the United Nation's work to secure a better future for all the world's women.

We look forward to a constructive dialogue with the Committee.

Thank you.