



Australian Government

**Statement by the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women,
Senator the Hon Michaelia Cash**

58th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women

24 March 2014

On 8 March, I led the Australian delegation to the 58th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (the Commission) held in New York. The Commission takes place annually to evaluate progress on gender equality and to identify critical and emerging issues and challenges.

Australia's high level participation at the Commission sends an unequivocal message confirming the Australian Government's strong commitment to women's empowerment and equality domestically, regionally and internationally.

Australia's recently appointed Ambassador for Women and Girls, Natasha Stott Despoja, accompanied me as a valued member of the delegation and we jointly advocated Australia's priorities at the Commission.

Australia's decision to appoint an Ambassador dedicated to promoting women and girls' human rights globally reflect our deep commitment to gender equality and women's leadership in particular.

I believe it is incumbent upon all people fortunate enough to live in free and democratic societies to do what we can to speak out to protect the human rights of women and girls.

Each year, the Commission aims to establish a set of global standards and formulate recommendations for governments, intergovernmental organisations (including in the UN system) and civil society to promote gender equality and the advancement of women worldwide.

The priority theme for the Commission this year is "Challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls". This year's Commission comes at an important moment in the lead-up to the elaboration of the post-2015 development framework. I joined other global leaders in reflecting on the challenges and barriers in implementing the Millennium Development Goals and ensuring gender equality remains a key priority as we shape the post-2015 development framework.

Australian priorities for the Commission on the Status of Women

As head of the delegation, I delivered a statement to the Commission on behalf of the Australian Government which outlined the Government's unwavering commitment to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Australia is advocating for a 'twin-track' approach to the post-2015 development framework that:

- includes gender equality and women's empowerment as a standalone goal; and
- mainstreams gender equality across other goals, in targets and indicators.

Australia again confirmed to the Commission that we have zero tolerance for violence against women and girls both domestically and internationally.

We have joined international action against harmful traditional practices including, child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation.

125 million women and girls have undergone FGM and 2 million babies are born to girls under 15 each year.

These are critical issues that must be addressed, domestically and internationally, and we must continue to ensure they are not swept aside. There is simply no excuse for any form of violence against women and girls.

Australian activities at the Commission on the Status of Women

Whilst in New York I met with many of my counterparts from around the world. These included our Indo-Pacific neighbours and also Indonesia, New Zealand, Japan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Timor Leste and Tonga. I also had meetings with many of my counterparts outside our region, including Canada, Denmark, Liberia, Netherlands, Norway, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Other meetings included discussions with senior United Nations officials who are seeking to mobilise the UN system to empower women and to overcome the scourge of violence against women, including the heads of UN Women, the UN Population Fund, UN Development Program and the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Ms Bangura.

In addition to sharing success and challenges in our domestic work to achieve gender equality, we discussed how we could work together to ensure a successful outcome at the Commission and on gender equality issues more broadly.

I also participated as a panellist in a number of events, speaking on a range of issues, including women, peace and security; women's economic empowerment; education; violence against women and women's priorities in the Pacific.

I was particularly pleased to launch the Australian Chapter of the Women in Public Service Project on 12 March. I look forward to the contribution this project will make to ensuring Australia is a place where women participation equally in public life and where this goal is also supported in our region.

Australian Delegation to the Commission on the Status of Women

In addition to Natasha Stott Despoja, I was also joined by:

- Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Ms Elizabeth Broderick;
- Dr Susan Harris Rimmer, Director of Studies at the Asia- Pacific College of Diplomacy at the Australian National University, and
- Ms Julie McKay, Executive Director of the Australian National Committee for UN Women.

The professional input of the Australian delegates was invaluable in providing expert advice to government on the priority and reviews themes during negotiation of the agreed Conclusions; and liaising with other civil society advocates both on the ground in New York and in Australia.

The strong Australian civil society presence at the Commission is vital in ensuring critical and emerging issues relating to gender equality and women's advancement will remain at the forefront of international policy discussions.

Conclusion

The extent of the challenge to achieve greater empowerment and equality for women and girls domestically, regionally and internationally continues to be vast. However, the Commission understands Australia is committed to working with others to advocate against the inequalities faced by women and girls and to entrench their human rights.

It was clear that we must continue to work together to support progress on the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region.

Globally inequality persists across many countries and women continue to face discrimination in access to education, work, economic assets and participation in government and commerce.

Violence against women remains pervasive and continues to undermine efforts to reach our stated goals.

Without addressing gender inequality in all its forms, we cannot expect meaningful progress in other spheres of development. The Australian Government will continue to support and advocate for the rights of women and girls to be fully respected and promoted in a proactive way that reflects Australian values and interests.

I am determined that this Government's commitment to gender equality remains resolute and unwavering.