



# AUSTRALIA



AUSTRALIAN MISSION TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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## **Fifty-eighth session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women**

Tuesday 11 March 2014

### **AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL STATEMENT: CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS**

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

(Check against delivery)

Mr Chair,

It is an honour to address the Commission at its 58th Session where we are gathered to consider our achievements and challenges in implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for women and girls and where we can take the opportunity to reflect on how we should address these issues in a post-2015 development agenda.

The world has made significant progress toward reaching the MDGs. This is an achievement of which we can all be proud. Having gender equality as a standalone goal has galvanised international support for gender equality and women's empowerment. We know that achieving equality between men and women is central to economic empowerment and sustainable human development.

But while progress has been made, particularly towards achieving gender parity in primary education under MDG 3, the overall outcomes for women have been insufficient and uneven. More work is needed.

Gender inequality persists in every country around the world. Every day, women continue to face discrimination in access to education, work, economic assets and participation in government. Only two out of 130 countries surveyed by the UN have achieved gender parity across all levels of education<sup>1</sup>. Women farmers produce more than half the world's food, but have far less access to land and resources than male farmers<sup>2</sup>. Violence against women continues to undermine efforts to reach all development goals.<sup>3</sup> We need to press ahead to reach MDG3. And we must make sure that gender equality is a cornerstone of the post-2015 agenda, and advances the human rights of women and girls in all countries.

Australia's recent appointment of a new Ambassador for Women and Girls reflects our commitment to be at the forefront of efforts to promote the empowerment of women and girls.

We are working bilaterally with a number of countries, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region in supporting women leaders, helping to end violence against women, promote economic empowerment and enable women and girls to access health services and an education.

We are also prioritising gender equality across the global security, trade and economic agendas.

One of the major impediments to the advancement of women, and to achieving sustainable development, is the prolific nature of violence against women. We know that **violence against women and girls** stops progress. Globally, one in three women who have been in a relationship has experienced physical and /or sexual violence by their intimate partner. Stopping violence against women is a necessary precursor to advancing development. Australia is not immune.

Mr Chair,

Australia has no tolerance for violence against women and girls. It is a universal issue that affects women of all backgrounds, races, cultures and economic circumstances and can be exacerbated by multiple forms of disadvantage, including disability, indigenous status and sexual orientation and gender identity. Domestically and internationally – including through our aid program and advocacy – Australia is actively contributing towards a world where women and girls can thrive and where their safety is assured.

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1 United Nations, *Millennium Development Goal 3 Fact Sheet*, 2013.

2 Worldwatch Institute, *Female Farmers Overcome Barriers to Feed Africa*, 2011.

3 World Health Organisation, *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*, 2013.

To address the devastating personal, social and economic costs of violence against women, the Australian Government is working across government, and with civil society, to implement our National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022. Under the National Plan, Australia has established a Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children, and the National Centre of Excellence to Reduce Violence against Women. The Foundation is successfully building awareness and the National Centre of Excellence is doing great work in building the evidence-base, including on primary prevention.

Violence of course takes many insidious forms. Australia is resolute in its view that there can be no excuse for violence against women and girls –historical, cultural, religious or legislative. We must do all we can to eradicate practices that condone the subjugation of women.

That is why Australia has joined international action against **harmful traditional practices** including child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation. Resolutions in both the Human Rights Council and General Assembly have focused attention on the consequences of these crimes and called on states to take action.

Australia is committed to this.

We commend the strong African leadership and the real momentum for change in eliminating **female genital mutilation**. As Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women, I have identified the elimination of FGM in Australia as a priority.

Female genital mutilation is illegal in Australia, and it is also illegal in some Australian States and Territories to take a person overseas with the intention of having FGM performed on them. We have conducted a review of Australia's legislative framework and are considering strengthening it to ensure Australian women and girls are protected to the greatest extent possible.

But legislation alone cannot change embedded cultural practices. We have commenced a dialogue with civil society through our national women's alliances, building on the National Summit on FGM held in April 2013.

We are funding a range of civil society projects on FGM that focus on raising community awareness, professional training for health professionals, and building an evidence and research base on the practice of FGM in Australia.

Similarly, on **child, early and forced marriage**, in February 2013, the Australian Parliament passed legislation to recognise forced marriage as a serious form of exploitation and a crime. The offence is aggravated if the victim is under the age of eighteen.

We are actively working with stakeholders to improve community awareness on child, early and forced marriage issues. We are developing a series of educative and awareness-raising materials on early and forced marriage, in close collaboration with non-government organisations.

This work is important. We all must work together to eliminate violence against women and harmful traditional practices both domestically and internationally. Without this, we cannot expect meaningful progress in other spheres of development.

Australia is committed to designing a post-2015 development agenda that focuses global efforts on economic growth and poverty reduction. But for meaningful progress in other spheres of development we must recognise that one of the most effective ways to drive economic growth and build stronger societies is to empower women and girls, and to work together to eliminate all forms of violence against women.

Gender equality and the promotion and protection of women and girls' human rights must be a priority in the new development agenda, both as a standalone goal and mainstreamed across other goals.

Achieving a strong, progressive outcome that prioritises gender equality and women's empowerment is critical. Australia's commitment to this vision is unwavering.

Thank you.