

# Commission on the Status of Women (51st Session)

February 2007, New York



## Australia's Country Statement

Madam Chair

It is a pleasure to address the Commission today.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the report *Delivering as One*<sup>i</sup>. Australia is looking forward to working with the United Nations and other member states on how the report's recommendation to strengthen gender architecture within the United Nations could be implemented.

I am pleased to report that Australia is performing well on international gender indicators. The 2006 United Nations Human Development Report ranked Australia third in the world on the Gender Related Development Index, and eighth in the world on the Gender Empowerment Measure<sup>ii</sup>.

### *Eliminating violence and discrimination against the girl-child*

And now I would like to focus on Australia's progress in eliminating violence and discrimination against the girl-child, which is the theme of this session.

Australia has recently ratified the two optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, demonstrating our commitment to the broader objectives of the Convention and the promotion and protection of children's rights.

Ensuring that children have the best possible start in life is a priority for Australia, and in recent years we have been working towards a National Agenda for Early Childhood. The Australian Government is also conducting a Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, to examine the impact of Australia's social and cultural environment on both girls and boys, and further our understanding of early childhood development.

UNICEF cites girls' exclusion from education as one of the clearest indicators of gender discrimination<sup>iii</sup>. School attendance is compulsory throughout Australia, and girls are achieving well against national and international benchmarks<sup>iv</sup>. Since the mid-1970s girls in Australia have been more likely than boys to continue their education beyond the minimum compulsory schooling - the retention rate in 2005 for girls was 81 per cent compared to 69.9 per cent for boys. And girls are continuing their education into later life - in 2005, women accounted for 57 per cent of all domestic higher education students.

Girls in Australia also benefit from a health system which the World Health Organisation has described as world-class<sup>v</sup>, and Australia's international ranking for numerous aspects of health is among the top 10 of the world's developed countries<sup>vi</sup>.

However, some girls do not share this good fortune, and Australia is taking strong action to protect children from violence, child abuse, neglect and exploitation. New internet child pornography offences came into operation in 2005, and strong legislation is also in place with regard to sex trafficking, sex tourism and female genital mutilation.

Australian governments are working hard to achieve better outcomes for Indigenous children. In July 2006 Australian governments agreed to establish a National Indigenous Violence and Child Abuse Intelligence Task Force and to address low rates of school attendance in Indigenous communities. Specialised health services are also available for Indigenous children, including a government-funded annual health check to ensure that Indigenous children receive optimum health care.

Beyond our national borders, Australia is committed to ensuring that our aid program makes a real contribution to achieving greater gender equality in development. The central message of the Australian Government's White Paper on the overseas aid program is that advancing gender equality is essential to reducing poverty and increasing the effectiveness of aid.

The aid program's new gender policy, to be released on the 1st of March 2007, seeks to make progress in four outcome areas:

- improved economic status of women;
- equal participation of women in decision making;
- improved and equitable health and education outcomes for women and men; and
- gender equality advanced in regional cooperation efforts.

### ***Involving men and boys in achieving gender equality***

I would like to mention a number of initiatives that reflect Australia's progress in involving men and boys in achieving gender equality since we last considered this theme at our 48<sup>th</sup> session in 2004.

Conversation about this issue within Australian society has been fuelled by a Parliamentary Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family and a project by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission called *Striking the Balance: Women, Men, Work and Family*. This national conversation highlights that both women and men in Australia are looking for better ways to balance their competing work and family responsibilities. Many Australian businesses are embracing flexible work arrangements, such as child-care assistance, job-share schemes and work-from-home opportunities to help employees balance their work and family life.

Family-based programmes in Australia play a significant role in nurturing gender equality. Our Family Relationships Services Programme helps children, young people and adults in all their diversity to develop and sustain safe, supportive and nurturing family relationships. Family Relationship Centres are being established across Australia to assist families at

all stages in their life, including people starting relationships, those wanting to make their relationships stronger, those having relationship difficulties and those affected when families separate.

There is strong support in Australia for International White Ribbon Day, and its message to men about their role in eliminating violence against women. This message is also reflected in the Australian Government's national media campaign, *Violence Against Women. Australia says NO.*, which provides practical assistance to those experiencing violence, to friends and family who want to know what they can do to help, and to perpetrators wanting to change their violent behaviour.

Australia takes pride in the success of our society to advance the status of our girls and women and we will continue to work to address remaining challenges.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> *Report of the Secretary-General's High Level Panel on System Wide Coherence: Delivering as One*

<sup>ii</sup> *Human Development Report 2006*, pp. 363, 367

<sup>iii</sup> *The State of the World's Children 2006*, p. 22

<sup>iv</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: *Australia's Welfare 2005*, p. 102

<sup>v</sup> "The Australian health system is world-class in both its effectiveness and efficiency: Australia consistently ranks in the best performing group of countries for healthy life expectancy and health expenditure per person." (World Health Organization 2003).

<sup>vi</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: *Australia's Health 2006*, p. 2-3