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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON. E.G. WHITLAM, Q.C., M.P.,  
AT AN INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY RECEPTION  
MELBOURNE, 8 MARCH, 1975

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This day, 8 March, 1975, and this gathering tonight have an historical significance far beyond the occasion. Today, International Women's Day, has been celebrated for well over sixty years as the day on which women, particularly working women, come together to make their voices heard and their problems known.

This year, International Women's Year, is a year which has come into being because women like yourselves - individual women, fighting women, women with determination and spirit - have not easily taken no for an answer, have not believed those who told them "It is not women's work", or "It can not be done by women."

International Women's Year, as all of you who fought and won and lost and came back to fight again will know, is not going to solve the problems of the world, the problems of women and through them of men and of children. It is however, our responsibility, the responsibility of you the women of Australia and of us your Government, to try to ensure that this year the world will be given a shove in the right direction - a shove without which changes for the good of women, of all women, not just a few might never occur.

The history of International Women's Day is often traced back to 1909 when women garment workers poured out of every garment factory in New York, Brooklyn, Philadelphia and Chicago protesting against the sweatshop conditions under which they had to work. It was like a mighty army rising in the night and demanding to be heard. The response was violence, assault and arrest. Half the women were under the age of twenty. Their demands were for the organization of all workers into trade unions, for equal pay for equal work, and eight hour day, a living wage and full citizenship for women.

During the next eight years women workers all over the world rose and protested about their working conditions. Their demands were the same, and a further demand was added as the First World War approached - the demand for peace, a protest against the ease with which the world was headed towards war. In 1910, it was proposed that March 8 should be set aside as a special day for women, a day to remind the world of women's demands for justice in the work force, for a place in society, for peace rather than violence and conflict.

Here in Australia we have the same splendid tradition - a past of which we can be justly proud. Our women formed their own trade unions and rose up from their workbenches. The great seamstresses' strike of 1882, here in Melbourne, led not only to an improvement in the working

conditions of their own industry but to a general investigation of the conditions under which both women and men were labouring. The findings of this inquiry were so appalling that they led to the formulation of the factory acts and other legislation aimed at protecting workers.

As the First World War approached our women were increasingly concerned by an easy acceptance of the inevitability of war. Many anti-war and anti-conscription women's groups were started, including the Women's Peace Army. Their fight for peace was untiring and uncompromising. When the Depression came the women were not content to sit idle. Nor were they content with the handing out of charity. Women's Employment Bureaux - run by women and for women - sprang up all over the country. Here in Victoria, clothing factories, jam factories and rural industries, to name but a few, were established to provide employment for unemployed and poverty-stricken women. The same happened throughout the rest of Australia.

In more recent times we have seen the wives of the Wollongong miners refuse to allow scab labour to work their husbands' mines. We have seen the women in a small factory in Whyalla refuse to be retrenched and set themselves up as a co-operative under their own management. Creating their own employment opportunities. And only weeks ago here in Melbourne there was the dramatic stand of a small group of women in the metal trades.

Many women in Australia have stood up and fought for decent working conditions for women, for a living wage and for equal pay for work of equal value. Many women in Australia have marched through the streets on 8 March reminding us Australians of these demands and of the demand for peace.

This day in Australia is part of a tradition of which we can be truly proud. And it has not only been the women of Australia who have fought for justice for women in the workplace and for peace in the world. Men, too, have fought for these demands. Many men, too, have marched our streets demanding a rate for the job, peace and protection against unjust laws.

The Federal Parliamentary Labor Party as early as 1901 accepted unanimously a motion that women should get not equal pay for equal work, but, much more significantly, equal pay for work of equal value. The Labor Governments of Australia can be proud of our historical record in this area, a record not just of rhetoric but of action.

Immediately this Government came to power in December 1972 we abolished conscription and re-opened the National Wage Case arguing cogently and successfully for acceptance of the principle of equal pay for work of equal

value. In May 1974 we again went to the Arbitration Commission arguing that, in all justice, women as well as men should be given a minimum wage below which no human being should be asked to work. Both these judgements have been contentious: Just principles are rarely implemented without problems, but we are proud that we have not compromised our principles and by June of this year both these judgements will be fully implemented. This makes 8 March 1975 even more significant. I might mention here that an ILO Study has shown that in the year ending June 1974 the world's biggest increase in real wages for women in manufacturing industry went to Australian women. Then real wages went up by 16%. From December 1972 to the December quarter 1974 average minimum weekly award rates for women increased by 73%.

Equal pay alone will not bring about justice in the work force. We are aware of this and have shown this awareness in our actions. When this Government came to power in December 1972 its program for women was two-fold: First to correct the past injustices from which they had suffered and, secondly to lessen distress and suffering, to respond sensitively to social problems affecting women and children.

These latter problems, problems which have continually arisen within Australian Society, include the need for shelters, health centres, contraceptive advice, rape crisis centres, marital counselling, problems facing women with young children, their recreation and leisure needs, their need for company and ease of movement and programs relating to the welfare of women.

Shelters and refuges for women can be traced back beyond the work of Caroline Chislm. An understanding of the pressing need for health services relating directly to the health problems of women gave birth in 1899 to the Queen Victoria Hospital here in Melbourne, staffed by and run for women. The welfare problems of women have been recognised and worked for by all the great women in the past. Catherine Spence, Vida Goldstein, Muriel Heagney, Rose Scott, Jessie Street, Edith Cowan - are among the better known of these many, many women.

To this day the majority of poor people in Australia are women, including mothers - many of them single or deserted mothers. The need to create a more humane world for these women is an overwhelming concern of this Government: We introduced the Supporting Mother's Benefit, we removed the sales tax on the pill, we are funding women's refuges, women's health centres and family planning centres.

Perhaps the most exciting development has been the acceptance of the need for multi-purpose centres, centres concerned with all the needs of women in the area. The Hunter Region Working Women's Centre in Newcastle is one such centre. It will cater for women's health, welfare, educational, work-force and legal problems as well as providing recreation and child care facilities.

To ensure that no area of need will be overlooked - that no social problem relating to women, whether they be married or not, with or without children, aboriginal or newcomer, English speaking or not, young or old, rural or urban, will be hidden away, forgotten or neglected - we have established a Royal Commission into Human Relationships. It is the First Royal Commission in history to investigate such social problems.

Of the first kind of demand, the demand for fairness and for justice, we have again shown a sensitivity to the existence of these problems and a determination to understand and overcome them.

Our concern has been for women at home as well as at work, for women in the unpaid as well as in the paid workforce. We have introduced anti-discrimination committees throughout Australia, new training and retraining opportunities. We have made every effort to ensure that unemployed or retrenched women are not overlooked. We have also, in exempting the matrimonial home from the dutiable value of the family's estate, publicly recognised for the first time in the history of Australia that the person who looks after the home and family contributes as much to the economic value of that family's home as the person who goes to work.

Further, mothers, indeed parents, whether they remain at home or are in the paid workforce, need help and support in the care of their children.

In the last year Australia has introduced a program of childhood services - the first of its kind in the world. It is not designed to impose an arbitrary blueprint on the children of Australia and their parents. Rather it is to be flexible enough and integrated enough to respond at the neighbourhood level to all their needs.

This program has begun to be implemented and \$75 million has been set aside for this financial year alone. Many of the projects being funded under this scheme are innovative and exciting, and the implementation of this program is going ahead as fast as is humanly possible. It will be some years however, before its effects become widely visible, before the present overwhelming needs will be satisfied.

No matter how genuine our attempts to ensure that women at work and at home are justly cared for, it is the range of possibilities, expectations and limitations which are instilled in girls in school which limit the scope of their later aspirations and determine the patterns of their future life. The importance of education as the major determinant of a child's future and the role that education has to play in motivating women to take up the challenge of new roles and of new life patterns is now being recognised.

These changes which we have undertaken, changes essential to emotional and financial independence and to the ability of women to choose freely the future which best suits her, are based on principles of equity and fairness, on our desire to correct injustices. We take great pride in these advances and achievements. It is nevertheless clear that many problems remain.

Too few women have been involved in making decisions at all levels of Government, in the Public Service, in the political parties and in the trade unions. Decisions which affect their lives both as women and as citizens. This must concern not only my Government but the whole Australian Parliament, the State Parliaments, local government authorities and all other bodies whose day-to-day decisions on matters of policy and practice affect the lives of all people, not just men.

Because of this concern the Australian Government has decided that as part of Australia's activities for International Women's Year a conference should be held in Canberra later this year on the theme of women and politics. It is hoped that this conference will be open to all women and women's groups and that all political parties and other relevant organizations will play a part. The intention is not only to discuss past and present participation by women in political activities but also to bring about a greater understanding of the means by which women can participate in the making of political decisions and the difficulties that confront them in so doing. Women from other countries who, through their elected or appointed positions have contributed to political change or women who have brought about significant social or political achievements from outside government, will also be invited to participate.

The major problem, however, in the course of this year is to ensure that our efforts are more than a fleeting, token gesture to lull women into a false belief that their problems are at last being taken seriously and understood in all their complexity. My Government has not committed itself and will not commit itself to any program which it does not genuinely believe is both desired by the women of Australia

and which will be of lasting benefit to them. During International Women's Year we are advancing and extending programs which we had already undertaken in response to the needs of women. But our overriding task and challenge for this year is to strike out at the attitudes which cause these difficulties and give rise to these problems.

We must challenge notions such as that of the breadwinner and the homemaker; values such as those of ambition, prestige, status and incessant promotion; dichotomies such as that between work and home; the hidden and usually unarticulated assumptions about women's abilities, capacities, life patterns, needs, skills and desires. These affect women not only in their employment but in the whole range of their opportunities in life. Both men and women must be made aware of our habitual patterns of prejudice which we often do not see as such but whose existence manifests itself in our language and our behaviour.

During this year, International Women's Year, we must question, discuss and reassess the attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and prejudices that society holds about women. We must create a society in which a woman's place is where she freely chooses to be, from which neither cultural prejudices, lack of education or lack of self-confidence will keep her.

Today, International Women's Day, is a start towards this. This year, International Women's Year, we must work towards a society which eases the stresses placed upon men in the workforce, which recognises that home is a place for men as well as women, but which insists that women have a place with men in the total Australian society.

My Government has always been committed to the theme of enlarging and equalising opportunities for all Australians, the theme of creating a more humane, a more compassionate society for Australians, the need to instil in women self-confidence and a sense of independence, the need to see more clearly each other's abilities and potential. We shall never be content with a society which buys its prosperity, its well-being at the expense of some other part of that society. We, all of us, men and women, would be diminished by such a society.

I have no doubt that you, the women of Australia, have carefully watched the changes that have come about in the last two years. For these are the changes which you yourselves have fought for so bravely. This Government may not always have done them in the way that you thought best, but we have done them sincerely and to the best of our ability. More significantly, our successes rest upon and are due to your determination, your experiences, your defeats and your successes.

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