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Statement by the Leader of the Australian  
Delegation, Ms Elizabeth Reid at Mexico City on  
Friday, 20 June 1975.

Mr President,

The Australian Delegation wishes to take this opportunity of congratulating you on your unanimous election to the important role of President of the first World Conference of International Women's Year. We are convinced that your perspicacity and insight, your unfailing tact and infectious good humour, will all help to ensure that our discussions are to the point, business-like and fruitful.

I would also like to extend the Australian Delegation's congratulations to the other members of the bureau and express to the Mexican Government our thanks for their generous gesture in hosting this conference, which we hope will be one of historical significance.

We listened with great interest to the addresses in the first plenary session of this conference yesterday morning. That delivered by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dr. Waldheim, was indeed thought-provoking. The comprehensive address which followed, given by His Excellency the President of Mexico, contained a number of concepts which attracted the attention of my delegation: Perhaps the most interesting was the President's exposition of the marginality of women in society.

There are some amongst us here today who believe, pessimistically, that this conference will achieve very little, others who are concerned that this conference will be unnecessarily politicised, yet others who query our ability to produce a concise and sensitive world plan of action. Australia is not amongst the pessimists. In recent years we have worked hard to bring about change in our own country and have learnt much from our successes as well

as from our failures. We are more than happy to share our experiences and to benefit from the experience of others but we do not want this conference to degenerate into a needless and time-wasting series of comparison of achievements. We do not deny the value of learning from each other's efforts and strategies but there is simply not the time to listen to lengthy enumerations of national programs - this is an international conference, our task here is to focus on fundamental issues and, more importantly, to develop strategies which will provide a framework for the achievement of our universally known goals.

If this conference is to be serious in maintaining that there is something wrong with the position of women in society, then we have two immediate and important tasks. Firstly we have to analyse the situation and see why it is wrong and secondly we must work out strategies for changing that situation. The clearest analysis which has been developed and one which cuts across cultural and social differences within and between countries is that which describes the inferior position of women as arising from sexism.

We must cease being afraid to use these words. Sexism is the artificial ascription of roles, behaviour and even personalities to people on the basis of their sex alone. This does not simply create differences but inequalities. We none of us live in, and it is impossible to imagine living in, a non-sexist society.

The fact that women as a group are supposed to have and indeed are forced to have, in many subtle and not so subtle ways, a different kind of personality, a different pattern of behaviour as a group, has consequences for their position in society.

It is evident to all of us that we live in societies which are ruled by men - in other words, our societies are patriarchal. This must also mean that our "womanly virtues" are not those virtues which are rewarded by society, that our enforced differences are not as hallowed or valued as they are said to be. But of course it is such a subtle process - a colonization by mute consent - that although we have in the past accepted these patriarchal values it is still difficult for us to see the way out.

To attempt to work out strategies for changing this situation must therefore, be our primary task at this conference. It will be slow and sometimes painful to come to terms with the reality of our problem, which requires as much a revolution in the heads of people as it does the modification of the structures which reinforce these destructive values.

The themes of this conference are equality, peace and development. The Australian Delegation does not believe, however, that these are separate issues to be dealt with in isolation from each other.

For many years, the emphasis in developed countries has been on political rights, but it has been the experience of the women in the industrialised countries that economic rights are as important if not more so than political ones. We consider that a demand for a new international economic order is far from a peripheral issue to the debates at this conference.

What concerns us is that in the discussion of the need for a new international economic order and of the charter of economic rights and duties of states, little attention has been given to the role women are to play in formulating and implementing this demand nor to the fact that women as well as men must benefit from this revolution. There must be a recognition that economic and social justice for women must go hand in hand with overall economic progress.

When practical, constructive and realistic proposals emerge from the on-going debates on the new international economic order, women must not only not be forgotten, but their present oppression and subjugation must be recognised and steps taken to correct them. Measures must be discovered which help women to help themselves towards participation in and benefit from the development process.

Women's involvement in establishing the new international economic order must be more than mere vague exhortations, insincere rhetoric and token gestures. The specific problems and experiences of women, including the poorest and least articulate, must be understood. If this is to be done with honesty it means asking and involving women themselves. Sensitivity must be shown towards those women - the vast majority of

women throughout the world whose voices are not being heard by the decision makers.

It is important that these problems not be seen through the eyes of developed countries alone. At the same time each of us are sensitive to the fact that we are best qualified to speak about our own experiences and to the need to stress that the economic development which has occurred in our country has not brought with it unqualified advantages for Australian women.

The transferring of the western economic growth model to other countries no longer seems desirable. Its harmful effects on the lives of women are only now being recognised.

Modern economic growth too often requires the introduction of mass technology, capital intensive techniques and organisation and, generally, the transfer away from women of their traditional and economically productive place in the society, relegating them to a marginal and dependent existence. Women thereby lose that economic independence they traditionally had.

With capital intensive development, unemployment and underemployment hits women hardest. The Economic Commission for Latin America's declaration, amongst others, points out that under the prevailing conditions of labour surplus, legislative attempts to guarantee equal opportunities for women have ambiguous consequences at best: consequences which reinforce the part played by tradition, custom, cultures, convention and laws in conspiring to defeat development. The documents from the African, Asian and Latin American regional conferences all stress this.

Those women who reject the western pattern of development - the increasingly larger institutions, distant workplaces, inflexible hours, a dehumanised environment which suppresses the social, spiritual and cultural lives of its workers - must work towards patterns of development which do not demand productivity and efficiency at any cost.

Efficiency in its common and harsh meaning is inimical to diversity, innovation, creativity and improvisation which are pre-requisites of true economic growth and development.

Development must not, as has happened in developed countries, make the personal a female province and then deprive women of the economic and political power necessary to destroy the dichotomy between the personal and the political, the home and the workplace, the breadwinner and the homemaker.

In our view a new world economic order must lead to new and culturally appropriate concepts of development based upon an interrelationship between social and economic factors.

Having said this, however, we believe that improvements in the lives of women cannot and must not await the outcome of deliberations on the new economic order. It seems clear to us that women throughout the world want action now and that this can be achieved within present resource limitations and boundaries by a resetting of priorities as well as a realisation of the importance of women in themselves as well as to development.

Women share with men the responsibility for establishing a just international order without which true peace cannot be achieved. We must not forget the women who have fought, time and time again, for such an order and those who are fighting still. But such is the tragedy that even when women and men fight together as brother and sister to free themselves and their people, too often the new society benefits women no more than the old. Their brothers in the struggle carry within them the roots of treason: the myths and prejudices which keep women in their place.

However we might struggle for a new order, the responsibility which we as women bear will be exercised in a different way, for we bring to the negotiating table different experiences. Women like the peoples of the third world, know the effects of oppression: oppression is the bitter bread of our daily lives. This insight, born of experience, must not continue to be considered irrelevant to the attainment of peace: It is this insight alone, gained through the anguish of violence and oppression, which justifies the linking of women with peace.

Peace settlements, as well as peace negotiations, have consistently disregarded the needs and wishes of women who are as affected as men by policies for the reconstruction of

societies and the resettlement of peoples whose lives have been disrupted by wars.

The basis of racism, racial discrimination, colonialism and neo-colonialism, alien domination is similar to the basis of that violence against women which we call sexism. It is based on the need, which may well be a learnt need, for power over other human beings. Patriarchy is yet another form of colonizing people. If women add their voices to the growing demand for peace, and if these voices are heard, then the victory will be that of demonstrating that any form of aggression, conflict or domination is an immoral way of life.

In any debate on the need to attain and maintain peace among nations, it is important to consider the prevalence of violence within societies. The recognition and removal of such violence is essential towards the recognition and removal of violence internationally.

In this context, violence against women cannot be ignored. Such violence includes rape, immolation, forced sterilisation, indecent assault, infibulation, unwanted pregnancy, clitorrectomy, unnecessary surgery and wife beating and shackling as well as mental violence.

Criminal assault on women is not the province of sick strangers. Violence against women is most often committed by men known to their victims, often fathers and husbands, who are otherwise respectable and acceptable members of society. Physical assault on women reflects the low status of women in society, the denial to them of the right to respect and dignity. This low status is reflected not only in the perpetration of such acts of violence, but by the frequent sanctioning, condoning, even admiration of such acts.

The continued oppression of women implies the maintenance of power over women by men through their imposition of sexist values. The enforcement of such values by labelling and treating as deviant any woman who in any way does not act out accepted roles, and the lack of recognition of the worth, contributions and talents of wives and mothers, is mental violence. The subjugation of women within and outside the home, the lack of recognition of women's work, the extreme abuses of psychiatrists who resort to shock treatment and brain surgery to "normalise" women who are unhappy in their so called "proper role", are

as violent as any physical assault on women. Violence by women to children, to themselves and to others, is a reaction and a cry for help against such mental and social crimes. Until such time as violence against women is recognised and understood, and ceases, peace will remain unattainable.

Equality is a limited and possible harmful goal. Associated with the struggle for equality have been some needed and just reforms: equal pay, equal access to formal education and vocational training, equality under the law and equal rights to vote and to run for public office. The importance of these reforms is as necessary pre-requisites both for the full participation we are seeking in the economic, social and political life of our countries and for the dignity and independence which are our rights as human beings.

But we can no longer delude ourselves with the hope that formal equality, once achieved, will eradicate sexist oppression - it could well merely legitimise it. For there is a real danger, a very real danger, that satisfaction with the achievement of formal equality will encourage the belief that all problems are thereby solved. However even if formal equality were to be achieved, all else still remains to be done.

In our deliberations in these coming weeks, the temptation to resort to pious platitudes and hollow but resounding rhetoric will be overwhelming. For the breadth of the task ahead of us, the difficulty in realising its practical ramifications, the unperturbable ignorance of so many people, the power of the structures we must combat, all militate against us.

Even if we, each of us here, were dedicated, sensitive and understanding, we could only hope to touch the outermost limits of the experience of most women. This realisation commits us to enabling women to determine the shape of their own lives, not because it is our favourite political theory but because it is the only way the decisions made will be the right ones.

We women will no longer be excluded from the sphere of decisions, though we should reject the concomitant domination and power, for we have experienced the consequences.

We women will no longer be relegated, either here or in our own countries, to a secondary place when "hard" politics are being discussed as distinct from "soft" women's issues. We reject this distinction: it is the distinction between the personal and the political. It is a part of our oppression.

We women will no longer be manipulated for political ends, either in the international or in the national forum, for this deprives us of our dignity.

We women will no longer tolerate paternalism, benign or otherwise, for it deprives us of our self-hood.

This is our conference."