

NATIONAL AGENDA FOR WOMEN

**The Commonwealth Government's plan
of action for advancing the status
of women towards the year 2000**

**A statement by the Prime Minister,
the Hon. R.J.L. Hawke, A.C., M.P.**

28 November 1985

1985 marks the End of the United Nations Decade for Women. All over the world governments have been reviewing their achievements in the last 10 years in raising the status of women.

Australia has been taking an active domestic and international part in this process. In July we sent a delegation to the End of Decade World Conference in Nairobi, which was held to review the achievements of the Decade and to devise strategies to ensure that progress continues.

Our participation in Nairobi reminded us of the harsh conditions under which women live and work in many parts of the world and of the continuing need to work for progress at the international level.

At that Conference, Australia endorsed, without reservation, the main conference document, the 'Forward Looking Strategies', which sets out a plan of action for carrying progress for women through to the year 2000.

We in Australia have achieved some significant progress over the Decade. In several areas of achievement for women we are in the forefront of the world's nations. Australia's governmental machinery for ensuring that women's concerns are taken into account in the formulation of Government policy, is in the top rank. The Women's Budget Program, with its full-scale assessment of the impact on women of the Federal Budget, is without parallel anywhere else in the world.

Our overall record is one of which we can be proud. Since coming to Office, we have in the short space of less than three years:

- . introduced the Sex Discrimination Act 1984, which provides the legal right to equal treatment;
- . established an affirmative action pilot program for women in the private sector workforce and introduced legislation for Equal Employment Opportunity in the Commonwealth Public Service;
- . ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women; and are represented on the UN Commission on the Status of Women;
- . given high priority to the representation of women on Government boards, authorities and instrumentalities, appointing more than 120 women to such boards
- . increased the supply of child care places by 50% in the past two years and undertaken to provide a further 20,000 new child care places by June 1988;

- . significantly increased funding for women's refuges and guaranteed their funding until July 1989;
- . this year exceeded the 50% target for employment of women in the Community Employment Program;
- . agreed to assist the transfer of nurse education from hospitals to Colleges of Advanced Education;
- . established a National Women's Consultative Council;
- . initiated a \$475,000 National Women's Consultation and Assistance Program to provide grants to national women's organisations and fund projects to improve the status of women.

A range of general Government policies have also been of significant benefit to women and their families. These include our income-support measures; housing policies; Medicare; the Home and Community Care Program, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, and the Children's Services Program. Women have also benefitted substantially, both directly and indirectly from the almost 460,100 new jobs generated since April 1983: 56 per cent of these jobs have gone to women, and full-time female employment has increased by 137,100 in the same period.

As we come to the End of the Decade for Women, it is time to say how we will continue to raise the status of women - to set out our Agenda for women as we move towards the year 2000.

We want to give women the opportunity to contribute to the full to the future development of our nation, whether in a domestic setting, in the workforce, or in any other aspect of life.

This opportunity must be open to all women in Australia. We are talking about opportunities for Aboriginal women, for women from migrant backgrounds, for women with disabilities and for those who are in other ways disadvantaged, for young women and older women, for women at home and women at work, and for women in all the wide variety of circumstances that can face them.

The Government is proud of the fact that in the past year an additional 107,200 women have found employment, over half of whom have moved into full-time jobs. At the same time the unemployment rates for both adult and young women have dropped and the numbers of discouraged women workers have also decreased substantially.

Although 46 per cent of women are now in the labour force, fully 64 per cent of women workers are employed in only three of the nine major occupation groups - clerical; sales; and service, sport and recreation, a situation which has shown little, if any, change over the decade. In general, jobs in these occupations attract low rates of pay

and offer little prospect of advancement. The Government is committed, through its Affirmative Action proposals which I shall address shortly, and other policies, to improving this situation.

We want to give women a say on this National Agenda and a role in determining its priorities. It is against this background that I would like to present to the House the Government's preliminary thinking on the content of a National Agenda for Women.

Through our National Agenda we will aim to open up opportunities to all women, and we will do that in three ways. We want to give women a choice. We want to give women a say. And we want to give women a fair go.

Giving women a choice is perhaps at the heart of our Agenda.

Women must be able to choose, more freely than has been possible in the past, the kinds of lives they wish to live.

They must be free to achieve economic independence: to choose employment, and the training to equip them for adequately remunerated employment, which, as we know, offers the best opportunity for escape from poverty and dependence. Full access to education and post-school training opportunities is a central aspect of our agenda to maximise women's choices.

Women must also feel free to choose to be full-time mothers without the fear that their contribution to family life is somehow of a lesser status than work outside the home. They must be able to choose to combine motherhood and employment and not feel that the difficulties of being a working parent receive no acknowledgement or support. Increasingly Australian women choose different roles at different stages of their lives. Many women want to leave the workforce to nurture their young children and then be able to return to employment without having to start at the bottom again.

In the past, economic factors and social prejudices have constrained women's choices and women have often been seen only in their familial roles as wives or mothers. Nevertheless, family life is the central focus for very many Australian women and the Labor Government is committed to giving support to families, and recognises the wide variety of family structures now chosen by Australians. Support is provided to all families with dependent children through family allowance payments. Since coming to office, one of my government's major social welfare priorities has been to increase assistance for low income families. To this end, the Family Income Supplement and the additional

pension/benefit for children have been increased by 60% and the mothers/guardians allowance has been doubled.

As part of our strategy for young people we have announced increases in education allowances, which should be especially helpful in giving young women financial support to undertake education and training. We have also announced the introduction of a new traineeship system for young people. This will provide important new opportunities for young women and men.

The Commonwealth Schools Commission is developing a national policy on the education of girls which will define a set of principles, objectives and priorities for action and serve as a basis for future State/Commonwealth collaboration on girls' education issues. On the same theme, following its acceptance of the main recommendations of the Quality of Education Review Committee Report, the Commonwealth Government is pursuing resource agreements with State Government and non-Government school systems. Among other objectives, these agreements will seek to obtain approximately equal representation and attainment of girls in major subject areas.

Child care is essential for working mothers but it is also needed by women at home who need a safe place to leave their children while they do the family shopping, or visit the doctor, or simply seek some relief from the demands of full-time child-raising.

The Labor Government's approach to child-care policy has been to expand the provision of places. When we came to office in March 1983 there were child care places for only 4.6 per cent of Australia's under-5 children. Following significant funding increases in our first two years in office we have now a three year plan to provide 20,000 additional child care places by 1988 at an estimated cost of \$107m. By 1988 there will be government subsidised child-care for 9.5 per cent of Australia's children aged under 5. We have also developed needs-based planning to ensure that new child-care places are located in areas of high need. We are committed to funding quality care that is affordable for low and middle income earners. Recent changes announced to the funding arrangements for child care centres will result in a fairer system which continues to benefit all families irrespective of income while recovering a proportion of the real costs involved from those whose incomes allow it. The adequate provision of child care will remain high on the agenda.

Women who choose employment are entitled to have access to all the opportunities offered by the Australian labour market, to seek employment in any occupation which interests them, at the level which meets their

qualifications. They are entitled to the enhanced skills and prospects which result from on-the-job training measures. They are entitled to a just wage for their efforts.

The Minister for Employment and Industrial Relations announced in September special efforts to increase women's participation in labour market programs and open up jobs which were traditionally performed by men. A National Strategy on Women in the Labour Force is being developed by his Department.

Implementation of some of the major recommendations of the Kirby Report will improve the participation of women in labour market programs. In addition to the traineeship system, a new integrated adult program will provide major support for the training of disadvantaged job-seekers, including single parents and women re-entering the workforce after long periods of absence due to family responsibilities. In the Special Trade Training Program, aimed at developing new approaches to complement traditional apprenticeship training, 500 places have been approved for women on preparatory pre-employment courses.

The Government is also pursuing a policy of affirmative action to enable women in all kinds of jobs to secure their entitlements to equal employment opportunity in the workplace. This policy was tested in a practical fashion through a 12-month pilot program. At the same time, we established a representative Working Party of government, business, trade union, higher education and women's interests, and a member of the Federal Opposition, to secure broad-based advice on how best to legislate to improve women's job opportunities.

Today I tabled the report of the Working Party, whose recommendations the Government has already accepted. I would like to take the opportunity today to place on record my appreciation of the constructive input to the policy made by all members of that Working Party.

As a major initiative in advancing the status and opportunities of women in the workforce, the Government will introduce legislation early next year requiring all higher education institutions and private sector employers of more than 100 persons to report annually to the Government on their plans for providing equality of opportunity for women.

We will establish a new statutory Agency within the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations portfolio to administer the legislation. I am confident that Agency will continue the cooperative and harmonious relationship with business, trade unions and higher education

institutions developed by the Office of the Status of Women during the pilot program.

Our Affirmative Action legislation will be supported by a number of complementary measures, designed to ensure that wherever possible obstacles to women's full participation in employment are removed.

The Government will actively encourage large private sector companies to supplement the child care services provided under the Children's Services Program by establishing child care for their employees. Tax deductions are available for some of the expenses involved, and these services will be exempted from the tax on fringe benefits. In addition, the Government will approach the States and seek their cooperation in removing regulations or other requirements which inhibit the development of new child care facilities.

I am conscious that some State laws and awards contain restrictions on women undertaking certain types of work. The Government will convene a high level conference of business, trade unions, State Governments and other relevant parties early next year in order to determine how these laws can be amended.

The other supportive measures will be in the vital area of education. I have already referred to the national policy on girls' education being developed by the Commonwealth Schools Commission.

In the context of the demands for qualified women expected to arise from the implementation of Affirmative Action, the Minister for Education will be taking additional steps to increase the enrolment of women studying engineering, the field of study where women are least represented, comprising only 5% of students. In introducing this program we will be building on several smaller initiatives already funded through the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission's Equity Program.

While affirmative action is designed to increase the range of jobs open to women, the Government is also taking action to improve the status of predominantly female occupations. The status of the nursing profession will be greatly enhanced by the upgrading of its training to a higher education diploma.

The Government is committed to encouraging the development of more efficient small business, which is a vital sector of the Australian economy. The Government recognises the important role that women can play as entrepreneurs and will ensure that its Small Business Programs are accessible to women.

We recognise the importance of maternity leave for women workers and that the current provisions put women in private sector employment at a disadvantage when compared with those in public sector employment who are entitled to twelve weeks paid leave. Many comparable Western nations have provisions through their social security systems for

paid maternity leave for women in both the public and private sector. In order to be better informed on the subject and following an initiative of the National Labour Consultative Council, the Institute of Family Studies is undertaking a review of the usage of maternity leave in the private and public sectors. I look forward with interest to seeing the results of this research.

I announced in June 1983 at the ILO Convention in Geneva that the Government was committed to ratifying ILO Convention 156, that covering Workers with Family Responsibilities. In keeping with accepted procedure, consultations are proceeding with State Governments with a view to reaching an early agreement on ratification.

It will never with any truth or justice be said of the Labor Government that we are unaware of the tremendous contribution to our national well-being made by women in the home. Without the work they perform the economy would not function as smoothly. At present women's unpaid work in the home and in voluntary activities for the community is not measured and thus tends to be undervalued. In 1988 the Australian Bureau of Statistics will carry out a major time use survey which will provide sound statistical data on women's multiple responsibilities.

Health is an area of fundamental importance to all women and to those for whom they are responsible. A National Agenda for Women would not be complete without action in this area.

To the traditional focus on the financing of care for the ill, and on women's reproductive health, needs to be added improvements to the general physical, mental and social status and well-being of women in our changing society. The Commonwealth Government, in the context of its commitment to achieve the World Health Organisation's target of health for all by the year 2000 and in response to a resolution from the Second National Women's Health Conference held in Adelaide in September 1985, will develop a national health policy in co-operation with the States and Territories and with women's health networks.

The policy will recognise the need to improve the overall well-being of women and will focus on the demands on women's health arising from their many roles.

The Minister for Health will appoint a special women's health resource person to co-ordinate development of the policy. From the policy will follow programs to improve the general health status of all women in Australia, and through them the health status of all Australians.

Giving women a say

The Labor Government places very great importance on the need to seek the views of women on matters of concern to them. We established the National Women's Consultative Council in 1984 to bring together a representative group of women to channel to Government the views of their organisations on issues such as taxation, child care,

matrimonial property. I would like today to thank Mrs Edith Hall, the Council's Convenor, and the Council members for the sterling work they are doing. I look forward to receiving the Council's first Report on its activities.

The Labor Government takes the view that women are entitled to have a say on all subjects in all the decision-making forums of Government and not just decisions on so-called 'women's issues'.

We are determined to improve our already substantial record in the numbers of women appointed to Government boards and authorities and I have asked the Office of the Status of Women to advise the Government on the means of doing so.

We are also conscious of the need to seek the views of particular groups of women on matters of concern to them. To this end the Aboriginal Women's Task Force has consulted widely with Aboriginal women throughout the country. Their Report will be published early next year, and the Government will provide a speedy response to it.

My colleague the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs is currently addressing the representation of Aboriginal and Islander women while consulting with Aboriginal communities on a replacement national Aboriginal and Islander consultative organisation. The Minister has also recently received a report reviewing the activities of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs as they affect Aboriginal women.

Recognising the additional disadvantages experienced by many migrant women, early in 1985 the Government consulted with experts, most of them women of non-English speaking backgrounds, on migrant women's issues. Recommendations for action were formulated in the four priority areas of health, safety and working conditions; access to language, education, training and retraining; access to child care; and services for aged and ageing migrant women.

These areas were specifically endorsed at a meeting of Commonwealth and State Ministers for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs. As part of our ongoing commitment to addressing the special needs of migrant women, we will ensure that in making government appointments the skills of migrant women are not overlooked.

To gain greater insight into the special needs of rural women, the Office of the Status of Women will early next year assist the Country Women's Association to conduct a major survey of country women. I am particularly looking forward to the results of this survey.

In the area of services for the aged and the disabled, the Government seeks both input and reaction to programs through key bodies including the Disability Advisory Council of Australia and the Australian Council on Ageing. Women are well represented on both these Councils.

I have invited young Australians to participate in the review of the Government's strategy for young people. I am personally involved in a national phone-in for youth covering all capital cities. I hope large numbers of young women will participate and thus have a direct chance to make their views heard.

The Government intends to give consideration to changing the make-up of the National Women's Consultative Council, when the term of the present Council expires next June, so that a number of women from community groups can be added to those representing national organisations.

Giving women a fair go

The Labor Government is committed to ensuring that all Australian citizens can live in dignity. We pride ourselves on being a nation which promotes justice and equality for all. A fair go for women is the third aspect of our National Agenda.

The Labor Government wishes to promote the dignity of women and to attack those attitudes or practices which undermine it, for instance, those which downgrade women's domestic and nurturing roles, which stereotype women as ignorant or foolish in the media or in advertising, or which look with equanimity on the violence perpetrated on women both outside and inside the home.

Many of these issues can only be addressed by Government on a long-term, considered basis. Others lie outside the scope of direct Government influence. However we are determined to act where we can, and to help create an environment where women's dignity is acknowledged and valued in those areas outside our sphere of direct influence.

For example, because of the level of concern expressed by women about the way they are depicted by advertisers, the Office of the Status of Women will commission research in this area as one of its activities to mark the End of the UN Decade for Women.

The Labor Government is committed to redressing women's poverty. The financial plight of many sole parent families is of particular concern to the Government. We have recognised the problem of unintended "poverty traps" which operate to keep people - particularly sole parent pensioners and beneficiaries - dependent on social security payments when they, and society, would benefit if they were able to join the paid work-force. In his September statement on reform of the taxation system the Treasurer announced a number of measures to reduce poverty traps. The Government will continue to take action to reduce poverty traps as resources permit.

The Labor Government is aware that the existing maintenance system is sometimes ineffective and fails to provide adequately for children in sole parent families. Some non-custodial parents are able to avoid making an appropriate contribution to the financial support of their children. The Government has under consideration a range of options to establish a sounder structure.

The rapid growth in the number of women's refuges over the past twelve years, so that there are now more than 165 refuges receiving State and Commonwealth Government assistance, is grim testimony to the toll of domestic violence. I am certain I have the full support of this House and of State Governments when I say this kind of violence is intolerable.

The Labor Government has significantly increased funding to women's refuges and, through the Commonwealth-State Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, has provided guaranteed funding until July 1989. We will evaluate these services to ensure the assistance provided is adequate.

Through sport women can acquire skills and enjoyment, improved physical health, and also greater self-esteem and a sense of achievement. The Government will continue to facilitate women's participation in sport.

The areas covered in this statement make up our National Agenda for Women to the year 2000. On some I have foreshadowed immediate action by the Government. For most our strategies will be longer-term or will need to be further developed. Nonetheless, these are areas where the Government commits itself now to effective action to advance the status of women.

I have already said that we want to give women a say on this National Agenda and a role in shaping its development. We will publish it widely and invite women to comment on it. Senator Susan Ryan, the Minister who assists me on the Status of Women, will lead this consultation process. We have already invited the National Women's Consultative Council to assist the Government in seeking women's responses.

Drawing on these widespread consultations we will develop our proposed Agenda into a detailed set of strategies and policies to further improve the status of women in Australia over the next fifteen years.

I trust that we can secure bipartisan agreement to our proposed Agenda. What we are seeking to achieve is a broad and comprehensive approach to improving the status of women, one that recognises women's important contribution to our society and which allows women to make free choices, unimpeded by discriminatory laws or practices. Under our National Agenda women in Australia will have a choice, women will have a say and women will have a fair go. I commend that National Agenda to the House.
