



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
LAUNCH OF RURAL WOMEN'S SURVEY
BATHURST - 8 FEBRUARY 1988**

David Simmons,
Ministerial colleagues John Kerin and Margaret Reynolds,
Dorothy Ross

Today we are releasing the results of a very important survey about the needs of Australia's rural women.

But we are doing more than simply publicising the results of a survey - as valuable an exercise in consultation as that survey has been.

We are also demonstrating our recognition that women living in rural areas face special problems which Governments have a responsibility to understand.

In that spirit then I must at the outset make special mention of the new Federal Minister whose responsibility it is to assist me in the development of policies on the status of women.

Senator Margaret Reynolds has always been active in both women's issues and rural concerns.

Her role as Minister principally responsible for the Government's policies on women, as well as her ministerial portfolio of Local Government, means she has a unique role to play in the area of rural women.

Of course she has a hard act to follow.

Senator Susan Ryan, as a Member of Parliament, Minister and Cabinet Minister, played a pioneering role in the achievement by women of more equal opportunity and access role in Australian society.

The Equal Opportunities and Sex Discrimination Acts, in whose formulation and implementation Susan Ryan played a major part, will stand as lasting monuments to her work, as well as enduring proofs of my Government's commitment to equality of opportunity for all Australians.

I am confident that Margaret Reynolds will be able to continue Susan Ryan's good work in this field.

I know she will have your good wishes and your cooperation in that task.

Let me also pay tribute to another great advocate and promoter of the interests of Australian women who is present today, the President of the Country Women's Association, Dorothy Ross.

The CWA has for many years been an important community link for country and rural women.

Under the Presidency of Dorothy Ross, it has continued to grow.

When Dorothy approached me in July 1985 about the possibility of canvassing women living outside Australia's major population centres about their needs and priorities, I welcomed her suggestion.

I saw it as a valuable opportunity to undertake comprehensive consultations with a part of the Australian community which is not often consulted and whose views are little understood.

I asked the Office of the Status of Women in my department to assist the CWA in the conduct of the survey.

As a result of the assiduous efforts and widespread networks of both the CWA and the Office of the Status of Women, some 14,000 Australian women gave us the benefit of their views.

To supplement the statistics which emerged from this process, a series of informal discussions with rural women was held in three states.

As a result we have a unique and valuable document which throws new light on the problems and aspirations of Australia's rural women.

Social issues head the list, including isolation and remoteness, and lack of facilities, services and information. Financial and economic issues, essential services, education and employment are also high priorities for attention.

Senator Reynolds, in her new capacity as Minister Assisting me on the Status of Women, will be working with her Ministerial Adviser, Sue West, on refining these suggestions and in conducting further consultations.

The Government will consider its response to this survey, taking into account several other rural advisory groups, including the Country Task Force - a group of Government members whose role is to listen, assess and report directly to me on issues of importance to country people.

The Government will also ensure that all State and Territory Governments and respective State and Territory Local Government Associations are aware of the findings of the survey. They will then be able to communicate any initiatives direct to the CWA.

The rural women's survey complements other consultative efforts we have undertaken.

The Aboriginal Women's Task Force last year produced the report "Women's Business" on the basis of extensive consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people.

And women across Australia have also been consulted as part of the research for the National Agenda for Women.

I will be releasing the Government's response to the National Agenda later this month to set forth action plans and goals in areas of concern to women as we move to the year 2000.

Already, however, the Government has put in place a number of programs which have particular relevance to rural women.

In the consultations for the National Agenda, and in the rural survey, so many women referred to the problem of domestic violence that we decided something had to be done about it.

No woman should ever live in fear of such violence. We want to let everyone know domestic violence is unacceptable and accordingly we are developing a three year education campaign on this problem.

Another large scale campaign involves getting more women to have cancer screening tests. Breast cancer and cervical cancer are major killers - but many women, including those in rural or isolated areas, don't have access to screening services.

As part of a pilot program in the Department of Community Services and Health, women will be encouraged to take part in a variety of screening trials which will help determine the best ways of reducing the incidence of cancer.

We have introduced the rural Grants for Women program to counter the comparative disadvantage of rural and provincial women in gaining of access to job opportunities and general services.

These one-off grants are available to organisations, groups or individuals for projects or research in the areas of employment, training, or services.

Fifteen grants under the 1987-88 program were announced last December, and John Kerin is to announce two more today.

A common theme which emerges from consultation with women throughout Australia is the critical importance of access to education and training in the achievement of full participation by women in our economic and social life.

Since its election in 1983 this Government has made expansion of educational opportunities a priority.

It was a national disgrace that when we came to office only about one-third of our students were staying on at secondary school to Year 12.

As a result of our policies, that proportion is now over one half. By the early 1990s, we hope that two-thirds of our students will be completing their schooling, opening the door to a fuller and more satisfying adult life.

The expansion of the Technical and Further Education system has provided improved access for thousands of Australians living in rural areas. New campuses have been built, others have been refurbished, and the range of courses has been expanded.

As well, the National Policy for the Education of Girls is encouraging recognition of the special needs of girls in rural communities where the range of work and training is restricted.

In the area of child care, which has been a particular priority of my Government, special funding has been made available to family day care schemes serving large rural and remote areas.

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is not my intention to list exhaustively all the efforts we are making to improve the status of women in Australian society - including rural women - and to enhance their access to government services.

It is a record of which I am proud but much remains to be done.

In 1922, at the inaugural conference of the Queensland Country Women's Association, the state president, Mrs Fairfax, made this comment.

"In our Association we are a great sisterhood of women, and a democratic one, putting aside petty difficulties of position, wealth, and pride. We are out to be a mutual help to one another, the town to the country and the country to the town, and there is plenty of room for improvement in this way."

That spirit of mutual help I believe summarises the great contribution of the CWA over many years. The Association's role in preparing this survey is yet another proof of its longstanding commitment to seeking the improvements for which Mrs Fairfax called in 1922.

Let me close by recording my Government's thanks to the women on whose views this survey is based and to the broader group of women, of today and of the future, whose interests will be served by it.
