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PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY
BRISBANE - 8 MARCH 1991**

Wendy Fatin
Sallyanne Atkinson
Roisin Goss
Beverly Perel, National President, UNIFEM
Phoebe Asiyo, UNIFEM Goodwill Ambassador

Twelve months ago I accepted an invitation to travel to Brisbane for a Breakfast sponsored by UNIFEM to mark International Women's Day 1990.

I did travel to Brisbane - but not, as it turned out, to attend Breakfast with you. Instead, 8 March was the day on which I launched my Government's campaign for re-election.

Let me take this opportunity to apologise in person for whatever inconvenience was caused by my cancelling that engagement, and let me tell you how good it is to meet you at last. My colleague the Minister assisting me for the Status of Women, Wendy Fatin, is also here today, and I know she welcomes, as do I, the chance to meet with UNIFEM organisers and members, and with such a large group of Brisbane people celebrating International Women's Day.

International Women's Day provides a good opportunity to applaud the many and varied achievements of Australian women - goals they have attained for themselves and for this country.

It is worth noting at the outset another recent first for Australian women.

Australian women serving on board the supply ship "Westralia" during the Gulf crisis carried out vital communications, technical and other roles - and they continue to perform them now. This is the first time in our history that Australian servicewomen have performed combat related duties in a combat zone - a significant development. At the same time, Australian nurses also played an important role in providing medical services.

As I said in Parliament this week, all Australians can be proud of the dedication, professionalism and courage shown by all our forces during their hazardous duties in the Gulf. We look forward to having them all home again as soon as possible, when their task is complete.

Every year since 1910 women have used International Women's Day to celebrate their achievements and to acknowledge the struggles yet to be won.

In Australia, there has been much to celebrate. Internationally, we have been at the forefront of the development of policies and programs aimed at the advancement of women. From 1902 when the enactment of the Commonwealth Franchise Act gave women the right to vote and stand for office in Federal elections, through the establishment of the female basic wage in 1949, to the adoption of the National Agenda for Women as Government policy in 1988, Australia has been a world leader in advancing the status of women.

Since my Government took office in 1983, our commitment to improving conditions for Australian women has been constant, and it has been effective.

This commitment was underlined last month when the inaugural meeting of the Commonwealth-State Ministers responsible for the Status of Women referred a paper detailing women's interests to the body responsible for the oversight of the current review of Commonwealth-State functions.

Ultimately the test of a Government's commitment is not what it sets out to do but what it really achieves. That is why I look with very great satisfaction not only on particular programs that we have initiated for the advancement of the status of women - important as they are - but on the evidence of underlying improvements in the opportunities available for women throughout society.

For example:

- . School retention rates for girls have increased from 44 per cent in 1983 to 70 per cent;
- . the percentage of women in higher education is 55 per cent - up from 46 per cent in 1983;
- . women's participation in the labour force is at 52 per cent compared to 45 per cent in 1983;
- . of the 1.6 million new jobs created in the economy since 1983, 58 per cent have been taken up by women.

These workforce figures reflect, in part, my Government's strong commitment to accessible, affordable child care. The provision of affordable, quality child care is crucial to enabling many women's full participation in the workforce.

Since coming to office, we have dramatically expanded the number of available child care places. By 1996, there will be over a quarter of a million places available Australia-wide under the Commonwealth child care strategy.

A new fee relief system assists low and middle income families to gain access to the services.

The Government is committed to further increases in the supply of child care in co-operation with States, local government, community organisations, the commercial sector and employers.

Fundamental to the right to work, is the right to be paid a fair wage. In comparison with other OECD countries, Australia has one of the lowest wage differentials between men and women. But it is still true that on average, Australian women earn less than half the over-award payments of men, which in turn constitutes a significant part of the 17 per cent gap between male and female average weekly ordinary time earnings. The Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner is to launch an inquiry into whether sex discrimination has been partly to blame for these inequities in award payments.

My Friends,

To mark International Women's Day, Federal Cabinet recently approved a package of initiatives designed to build on the progress we have made as a community in advancing the status of women.

The first of these addresses the growing community concern about the level of child abuse in our society, and the urgent need for preventive measures. This was reflected in the consultations which led up to the National Agenda for Women.

Cabinet decided to allocate \$1.2 million over three years for the establishment of a National Child Protection Council to co-operate with State and Territory initiatives and co-ordinate activities associated with child protection.

The Council will focus the attention of all levels of Government and the community on the need to reduce the incidence of physical and sexual assault of children and assist in the development of strategies to do so, for example by investigating possibilities for uniform legislation.

I am also pleased to announce the establishment of the Prime Ministerial Women and Sports Promotion Awards, including an award for media coverage which recognises and encourages support for women's achievements. Last week's Equity for Women in Sport Conference held in Canberra served to underline the importance of taking action in this area.

Other initiatives are

- . the extension of the Commonwealth/State Council on Non-English Speaking Background Women's Issues for a further three years to mid 1994; and
- . the development of a Statement on Women and the Environment

A separate statement is being issued which provides more details of these and other developments.

My Friends,

Life is changing for the better for Australian women. Opportunities are available here because, over the decades, Australian women and Australian governments have worked in partnership to develop them.

Sadly, but realistically, we must recognise that for women in many parts of the world, the road to equality of opportunity is long and troubled.

Throughout the world, organisations such as UNIFEM are working hard to help women travel this road. UNIFEM has a fine record in changing women's lives for the better. Through development programs which emphasise long-range planning, education, entrepreneurship and creative problem-solving, UNIFEM is expanding the opportunities available to women in developing countries.

In Australia, this National Committee of UNIFEM, of which I am proud to be patron, has been formally in existence only a relatively short time.

During its first months of operation UNIFEM Australia raised some \$12,000 from private and corporate donations. These funds are to be used for the UNIFEM/World YWCA/AIDAB project underway in the South Pacific aimed at promoting advocacy and participation of women in development at the grassroots level.

It gives me great pleasure to present this cheque to UNIFEM's Goodwill Ambassador, Phoebe Asiyo, today. May it be the first of many to be raised by UNIFEM Australia for the advancement of women in the region.

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