



PRIME MINISTER

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EMBARGO 0001 AM TUESDAY 8 MARCH 1994
STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON PJ KEATING, MP

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Today is a significant day on the international calendar, commemorating the achievements of women the world over who have contributed to improving the status of women.

International Women's Day is especially significant for Australian women this year as the nation celebrates the centenary of women's suffrage and commemorates the struggles of earlier generations of women to gain fundamental democratic rights.

International Women's Day provides an opportunity to consider the gains which have been made, as well as where further action is needed, to improve women's lives and opportunities.

Over the last 12 months, the Commonwealth Government has acted on the issues that Australian women have nominated as their most pressing concerns. Since launching the Government's New National Agenda for Women in February last year, progress has been made in a number of crucial areas.

Employment

Historically, International Women's Day recognises the efforts of those who have fought for women's rights in employment. At the beginning of this century, women garment workers in the United States were striking for better pay and working conditions and, at the first Australian Women's Day rally in 1928, women called for equal pay for equal work and an eight hour working day.

The new *Industrial Relations Reform Act* (1993), which comes into effect at the end of this month, makes a significant contribution to the Government's achievements in the employment and industrial relations arenas. In addition to legislating to ensure that all workers in Australia have access to key minimum entitlements in employment, the new Act will introduce a range of

mechanisms to ensure that enterprise bargaining is accessible and fair for women.

Discriminatory provisions in new awards and enterprise agreements were made unlawful under amendments to the *Sex Discrimination Act* in 1992. The new *Industrial Relations Reform Act* takes this reform even further by ensuring that discriminatory provisions in awards cannot be deemed to be in the "public interest". The Act also requires that an annual report be made to the Minister for Industrial Relations on the impact of enterprise bargaining on women.

Under the new Industrial Relations Act, the Industrial Relations Commission will, in addition, be able to make orders to ensure that men and women receive equal remuneration for work of equal value, including, for the first time, in the over award area which is especially important for women.

Caring for Children

The Government is taking steps to recognise the unpaid work of women caring full-time for children. The Government will introduce the Home Child Care Allowance of up to \$30 a week. This payment will provide an independent source of income for women in unpaid employment in the home. It will not be income tested on family income.

The Home Child Care Allowance will replace the Dependent Spouse Rebate which is currently paid as a tax rebate to the spouse in employment, usually the husband. The replacement of a tax concession with a cash payment has many advantages for women. First, the payment can be made directly to the person with primary responsibilities for caring for the children, usually the mother. Second, some 55,000 low income families who do not pay enough tax to get the full value of the Dependent Spouse Rebate will now be entitled to the direct payment. And finally, up to 120,000 families will be able to claim the new payment as soon as their circumstances change, such as when a woman leaves work to have a baby, rather than waiting for a new financial year as is the case now.

Currently, most working families do not receive any assistance from the Government in paying for child care. The introduction of the Child Care Rebate on 1 July this year will provide long overdue recognition of the high cost of child care for many working families.

A rebate of up to \$28 a week for one child and \$61 for two or more children will be available. The full rebate will be payable where families have spent \$110 a week on child care for one child or \$220 for two or more.

There has been some criticism that the Child Care Rebate is unfair as it will not be income tested. The Government's view is that the cost of child care should be treated similarly to other expenses workers incur in earning an income, expenses such as the payment of union dues, the cost of the membership of professional associations and the cost of protective clothing.

Such expenses are treated as tax deductions and are not income tested. The criticisms against the general child care rebate seem to imply that expenses born, by and large, by women workers are somehow less worthy of recognition than the more traditional costs incurred primarily by male workers.

Stopping violence against women

This Government has been the first to tackle, at a national level, community attitudes to violence against women. We have launched hard hitting education and publicity campaigns which emphasise men's responsibility for their violence.

We are also tackling the issue of gender bias in the legal system. The Government has provided funding to the Australian Institute of Judicial Administration and the Family Court to conduct gender awareness programs for judges, magistrates and court personnel.

The Australian Law Reform Commission was also asked to report on women's equality before the law and its Interim report was tabled in Parliament last week.

This reference generated an unprecedented level of public interest. Hundreds of women from around the country came forward to recount their experience of the legal system. A particular focus was the link between violence against women and their lack of access to justice. Many women drew attention to serious difficulties they have in gaining protection from, or redress for, violence against them.

The Government will be considering the recommendations of the Interim Report, including the establishment of a National Women's Justice Program to meet the needs of women for legal advice, information and advocacy as well as for greater opportunities to effect the development of new laws.

We are also working with the States and Territories to achieve national consistency in domestic violence legislation.

And we have given priority to the safety of women escaping violence, with funding for programs to assist women in rural and remote areas and with ongoing funding for women's refuges.

Women's Health

The Government is proud that Australia now has among the best breast and cervical cancer screening programs in the world.

With improved breast cancer screening underway, we are now seeking further improvements in the way treatment and care are provided to women

diagnosed with cancer. Our aim must be to get the system right and to make sure women have much better information about treatment options and a real ability to choose what best suits their condition.

Commonwealth and State Health Ministers have made the fight against breast cancer a priority. They are soon to release a National Health Policy discussion paper for extensive consultations, including with women and women's organisations. The paper will propose a national goal to reduce deaths from the disease and invites views on strategies to achieve that goal. The strategies include improved diagnostic, treatment and support services, better access to services, as well as enhanced clinical and other research.

Choice and Equity

Essentially the Government's policies are about providing women with greater choice and backing up those choices with supportive employment, income and child care arrangements.

The proposals under consideration in the context of the Green Paper on Restoring Full Employment are about making sure that women have access to job and training opportunities and that appropriate support is provided for those who choose to remain outside the paid labour force to care for children.

I recently hosted a meeting of over 40 national women's non-government organisations to obtain their views on the Green Paper proposals and other priority issues. These Round Table consultations, with a broad range of women's organisations, will take place twice yearly to ensure that women's voices are heard on major policy issues. They are a new addition to the measures I have adopted to ensure that Government policy is sensitive to women's needs and reflects women's views and priorities.

Conclusion

Earlier this year I said that one of the great reconciliations underway in Australian society is the reconciliation between men and women over roles and responsibilities and the enhanced opportunities for women's participation in the workforce and society generally. On a day when we commemorate the undeniable and irresistible momentum that has changed forever the opportunities available to women, it is important to remember also that such changes demand greater flexibility and understanding by men and women.

Without a doubt, Australia benefits from women's greater participation in the economic, social and family life of the nation. It is incumbent upon the Government to find ways to promote real choice and equity for women and also to support women and men in coming to terms with the changes.

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