

34



**PRIME MINISTER**

\*\*\*Check Against Delivery\*\*\*

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP  
THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENTS FOR THE UNITED  
NATIONS FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN  
TUESDAY 29 AUGUST 1995**

I am pleased to be here today to mark Australia's involvement in the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women.

Many people are cynical about international conferences. Some media reports over the last week have referred to the United Nations Conference as a "talkfest", meaning all talk and no action.

We all know the syndrome. You don't have to be a cynic to recognise it - very often, just a casual observer.

It is true that, in many countries, implementation of the Strategies document for the Advancement of Women from the Third World Conference has been slow or non-existent.

The desire for faster progress towards true equality for women and men is behind the idea that all nations should commit themselves to tackling the most pressing needs of women in their own countries, before the UN Conference.

And not just commit themselves. "Talkfests" commit themselves. We should be suspicious of the word "commit" unless there is evidence of the will to actually do.

The Australian Government welcomes this Conference of Commitments. We are very proud to have initiated it. But we stress the meaning from the start - by commitment we mean doing.

Having had some experience of international conferences and the way the UN works, I know this could not have been an easy task and I congratulate the head of OSW, Kathy Townsend, and her team.

For many years, Australia has been an international pacesetter on status of women issues. The recently released United Nations Development Program report on women points to Australia as having one of the best records, ranking number six out of 130 countries on a range of criteria including women's share of income and participation in education.

As I said in a speech to the Press Club last week, this sort of achievement does not come about haphazardly or accidentally or through good public relations. It is the result of thinking and doing - the long hard slog of policy development and implementation.

We could not commit ourselves to the things I will announce today without the policy foundation we have laid for women since 1983.

Policies which have supported the dramatic increase in women's participation in education and the labour force; a network of affordable, quality child care; significant real increases in family assistance paid to women; the establishment of a National Women's Health Program; the introduction of the Sex Discrimination Act; and the extension of superannuation to 85 per cent of women workers.

These policies are just part of the Government's program of reform to improve the status of women. And we are proud of our achievements.

But satisfaction is not complacency. Reform never stops.

For the Government's commitments to be effective, they must give expression to the needs, concerns, ambitions and interests of Australian women.

The Australian Council for Women, headed by Sandra Yates, was set up to advise the Government in the lead-up to the Conference on how we could address the barriers to the advancement of women.

The Council consulted with women's organisations, held community consultations and conducted the "Purple Postcard Campaign", which asked women to tell the Government the one thing that concerned them. Not surprisingly, most women told us more than one thing.

The Government also commissioned research which sought the opinions of women who were likely to miss out on putting their views through the more formal channels of consultation.

We learned a great deal about the concerns of Australian women. But four general areas emerged as the primary focus for change and it is in these four areas that the Government is determined to advance the status of women.

The four areas are: balancing work and family responsibilities; violence; health; and public life and decision-making.

The most important area raised by women was the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities.

In the consultations, women made it clear that they thought their position had improved markedly. In particular, they said that today they had more freedom, choice and opportunity.

But they also recognised the downside of these changes. Unfortunately, because now women can do anything, they often end up doing everything. As one woman put it, her life consists of "Juggling everything, especially work with the children." She was "the first to get up and the last to go to bed."

And this is not just hearsay and anecdote. There is concrete evidence of it. Just last week the Australian Institute of Family Studies released a report showing that the majority of women still had the main responsibility for household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, shopping and laundry, even when the women were in full-time paid employment.

Essentially, there is little Government can do to help with this modern malaise. The "double shift" which women talk about is not one that governments can arbitrate.

But there are things the Government can do to help women cope with their different roles.

Many women pointed out that real equality had yet to be achieved in the workplace. The Working Women Centres set up by the Government can play an important role here in ensuring equity for women at work.

Over the past six months, the existing five Working Women Centres have received more than 3,500 enquires from women about work-related matters. The centres provide information and assistance to women on issues such as pay, working conditions, enterprise bargaining and training. They are particularly important for blue collar women and are probably the most important source of information on employment issues for women from non-English speaking or indigenous backgrounds.

I am pleased to say that the centres have been welcomed by women and women's organisations. The only thing that has not been welcomed is that two States do not have a centre.

Today, I am announcing that the Government will set up Working Women Centres in Victoria and Western Australia, providing national coverage for this important resource. Given the direction which Jeff Kennett and Richard Court are taking industrial relations and employment conditions in their States, I predict that the centres will see brisk business in Victoria and Western Australia.

Another issue raised by women juggling work and family responsibilities is the difficulty of taking leave to care for sick children. There was strong support for making existing leave more flexible. The Government agrees with this position and will argue it before the Industrial Relations Commission.

Women were also very strong in their support for the choice to stay at home to care for their children full-time. And there was a view that the needs of women at home were often overlooked.

One area where this issue can be addressed at the outset is the new communications and information technology. The new technology is set to transform all our lives and we must ensure that the technology does serve the interests of all Australians, not just those in the workforce or in education. I have asked the National Information Services Council to advise how the new technologies can respond to the needs and interests of women working full-time at home.

In the consultations, women at home raised the need for training to up-date their skills: some were concerned that they would be left behind in the information revolution. To address this, I have also asked the Council to develop proposals for the training of women at home in the new technologies.

The Council will also report on how all women, including women in rural and remote communities, can get equitable access to the new communications services. The Taskforce on Women and Communications Technologies in the Office of the Status of Women will be extended to ensure that women's participation in the development of new technologies is maximised.

During the last election I announced the New National Agenda for Women. I remember at the time saying that perhaps the most sobering message to have come from our consultations for the New Agenda was the fear of violence felt by women in Australia - violence on the streets and in the home.

Regretfully, I must say that violence is still one of women's main concerns. We must and can do more to stop it.

There have been very successful projects in the United States and New Zealand which show that coordinating the assistance and response of governments, police, legal services and community agencies leads to a lower level of violence against women, and fewer repeat offences.

The Commonwealth will work with State and Territory governments to develop an integrated approach to stopping violence against women.

In the consultations, women frequently raised the need for early education to reduce violence. The Government will contribute towards running forums in each State and Territory to develop effective ways of dealing with violence in Australian schools.

In the area of women's health, many women spoke of the need to give priority to better health services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who face additional problems because of discrimination, isolation and ignorance of their needs.

The Government will introduce a new program targeted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The Healthy Women, Strong Families Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women will focus on health checks; maternal and infant health monitoring; and health promotion and prevention. Special attention will be given to rural and remote communities where such services are currently inadequate.

Last week, Frank Blount, the head of Telstra observed that at the same time as the status and influence of women have expanded, and at the same time as women are generally outperforming men educationally, the proportion of women senior managers in Australia's largest companies actually fell. As he said, "There is something quite evidently wrong here".

To promote women's participation in public life and decision-making, the Government will assist in the establishment of a national peak body of women in business. The Australian Council of Businesswomen will provide a stronger voice for women in business to Government, business networks, the media and the community generally.

The Government will also encourage women's participation on private sector boards. We will work in partnership with the Australian Institute of Company Directors, the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry on a three-year initiative to increase the appointment of women of merit to private sector company boards.

I have concentrated today on the Government's commitments to women in Australia.

But we also have a responsibility to assist less wealthy countries in our region in their efforts to improve the status of women. Australia has been the lead regional donor for the Pacific region in the lead up to the Conference and we will continue in this partnership. Australia will provide funds to non-government organisations in the Pacific Island nations to assist in the implementation of commitments arising from the Conference.

It gives me great pleasure to hand the Government's national commitments for women over to my colleague, Dr Carmen Lawrence, who will announce them on behalf of Australia at the United Nations' Fourth Conference for Women.

I wish Australia's delegation to the Conference and the women attending the forum for Non-Government Organisations well, and I thank all the Australian women who voiced their concerns and contributed to the development of the Government's commitments to improve the status of women.