

Consideration of Australia's Combined 4th and 5th Report by the Committee on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

30 January 2006

Opening Statement

Madam Chair, distinguished members of the Committee.

It is a pleasure to meet with you today to discuss Australia's progress in implementing our commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Australia takes our obligations under the Convention very seriously, and (s)6.306.6(s)6.3(lkvm012 T)- Kerry Flanagan. I head the Australian Government Office for Women. Mr Matt Minogue is Assistant Secretary of the Human Rights Branch in the Attorney-General's Department. Mr Vincent Giuca is the Regional Director of our Department of Immigration. Ms Gabrielle Burrell is from the Office for Women.

Consultation and Coordination

I would like to explain a little about the context of Australia's system of government as this fundamentally affects how we interact with and deliver services to Australian women.

Australia has a federal constitutional system in which legislative, executive and judicial powers are shared or distributed between the national government, six state governments, and two internal self-governing territories. This means that nine governments in Australia share responsibility for issues in which the Committee will take a close interest in today.

At the national government level, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for

The Australian Government primarily consults with civil society on issues affecting women through four government-funded National Secretariats that coordinate over 60 Australian national women's organisations. The Attorney-

goals and widen their life choices. Australian women and girls continue their strong performance and participation in education and training.

Since the mid 1970s, girls have been more likely than boys to continue through secondary school to the uppermost level of schooling. By 2003, 81 per cent of girls completed the final year of secondary school, compared to 70 per cent of boys.

Women account for 54.4 per cent of all higher education students. Importantly, women are now participating in the highest levels of education at much more equal rates. In the first semester of 2004, women accounted for 46 per cent of all students beginning a Masters course, and 49 per cent of those undertaking a doctorate.

The number of women in Australia undertaking traditionally male areas of study such as law and medicine has increased in recent years. Australia also has a scheme to encourage women into non-traditional trades as apprentices. However, women continue to be under represented in some fields of study, such as engineering, information technology and architecture.

Women's employment

The Australian Government provides legislative protection to enable women's full participation in the workforce and to assist employees in balancing their work and family responsibilities.

The proportion of women aged 15 years and over in paid work has increased from 49.6 per cent in 1996 to 54 per cent in March 2005. Women's wages have also increased. Women's earnings as a proportion of men's have risen from 83.2 per cent in February 1996 to 85.1 per cent today.

The Government is making a substantial investment of AUS\$3.6 billion over four years to reform our social assistance system. Changes to income support

The Australian Government expends considerable resources on supporting families with the cost of childcare, and expects to spend around \$8.4 billion over the next four years.

Women and families has also been a key focus of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. In February 2005 the Sex Discrimination Commissioner launched

The project aims to examine family responsibilities and paid work, and will report in early 2006.

Women in Retirement and Later Years

Many payments are available to defined groups, such as the aged, and are often means tested to ensure that payments are targeted to those that most need them. This model ensures that those on low incomes, or in vulnerable circumstances - many of them women - receive the greatest assistance.

For example, the Australian Government has continued to ensure that the basic single rate of retirement pension is at least 25 per cent of the male average weekly earnings, which was passed by legislation in 1997. As at September 2005, there were 1,127,733 female age pensioners, around 60% of all age pensioners, benefiting from this measure.

Australia not only has a universally available means tested basic pension for all

In September 2005 Women Ministers agreed to a National Strategy to Increase the Participation of Women on Boards. Women hold 32 per cent of Commonwealth controlled positions on Australian Government Boards and around 30 per cent of senior executive service positions in the public service across most Australian governments. There is still a much longer way to go in increasing the number of women on private sector boards. At the moment, women hold only around eight per cent of Board Directorships in the top 200 companies listed on the Australian Stock Exchange and around ten per cent of private sector executive management positions.

Women's Safety

Australia has demonstrated a strong commitment to preventing, reducing and responding to domestic violence. Women's ministers and their advisers from all Australian governments focus on this issue at their regular meetings. All governments have continued to implement measures to address this issue.

As outlined in the response to issues raised in the pre-sessional questions the successful national media campaign,

operating in some states provide advice on issues such as legislation, occupational health and safety, and protection against sexually transmitted diseases. They also link sex workers interested in moving out of the industry with further education courses to assist them with gaining the skills and opportunities required to change their occupation.

Australia is strongly committed to eradicating trafficking and providing support to victims of trafficking. The

is a AU\$20 million package of measures to address prevention, detection and investigation, criminal prosecution, victim support and rehabilitation. Implementing this plan involves a coordinated effort by a number of government agencies at the national level, as well as a strong working relationship with agencies in state and local governments, such as the police.

Australia is proactively investigating people trafficking offences. Between 1999 and January 2006, the Australian Federal Police have undertaken over 100 investigations into sexual servitude and slavery related offences, and 14 alleged offenders have been charged, with a number of matters still before the courts.

Australia has in place a comprehensive programme of support for suspected victims of trafficking who are willing to assist with investigations. Qualified social workers tailor the support to meet each individual victim's needs. The service provider has recently undergone independent evaluation and a further contract has been granted on that basis.

Victims of trafficking who have assisted with an investigation or prosecution may be eligible for a Witness Protection Visa to remain in Australia if they would be in danger if they return home. Where a suspected victim is unable or unwilling to assist with investigations, in accordance with Article 8 of the UN Trafficking Protocol they are assisted in returning to their home country. Australia provides return and reintegration assistance to victims returning to Thailand, which is our most common source country, and is investigating opportunities to expand this assistance to other source countries in South East Asia.

The Australian Government is also working together with other countries in our region to address trafficking beyond Aust

more than half of the worlds' refugees are women and children. As at March

Reservations and Optional Protocol

The United Nations Development Program Human Development Report 2005 ranked Australia second in the world in its and seventh in the world in its . Australia was also ranked tenth in the world in the World Economic Forum's 2005 study titled

We take pride in the success of our society to advance the status of women and work to meet the challenges that remain.

We welcome your views and in this regard we look forward to a constructive dialogue with the Committee today.

Thank you.