

## **Introductory Message**

I am delighted to take part in this virtual meeting. It presents a great opportunity for me to engage directly with women and women's organisations about their concerns and interests. I would like to thank all those who took the time to participate.

Initiatives like this virtual meeting are important avenues for women to communicate meaningfully with one another and the Government about gender issues.

It is fantastic to see so many diverse and interesting questions. As the new Minister for the Status of Women I am proud to be building on the work that the previous Minister Tanya Plibersek began and I would like to acknowledge her enormous contribution over the last three years to advancing the cause of gender equality.

I'm particularly excited about progressing gender equality challenges across my three portfolios – the Status of Women, Employment Participation, and Child Care. Where these portfolios intersect there is a real opportunity to ensure the best outcomes for women in the workforce.

The Australian Government is committed to gender equality and we are currently working towards three main priorities:

- reducing violence against women;
- improving women's economic security; and
- ensuring women's equal place in society.

Of course progressing gender equality is not just a matter for the Minister for the Status of the Women. Gender equality is something which we must work towards across Government. This is why, in answering your questions, I have consulted with some of my ministerial colleagues to ensure that I was able to provide the most useful answer to you.

The Gillard Labor Government is committed to moving awareness of gender equality into the mainstream by developing the capacity of all government departments to recognise and address inequalities.

I would like to thank the Centre for Leadership for Women for arranging this initiative, and again thank the individuals and organisations who put forward their questions. I look forward to continuing to hear your ideas in the future.

**QUESTION:** *Why is the state government selling off public housing in Queenscliff (9/10/10, 60-62 Gellibrand St, Queenscliff) when there is a shortage of public housing in the Bellarine region? Lack of adequate or appropriate housing affects all women particularly those with children and older women.*

- Chris Johnson

**RESPONSE:**

Housing affordability is a significant issue in our country, and I know particular difficulties are faced by older women and women with children when accessing affordable housing that meets their needs. I'm committed to working with my Ministerial colleagues to make sure Australian women have access to safe, secure, and affordable housing.

While the Australian Government provides funding to states and territories under the National Affordable Housing Agreement to deliver public housing to people in need, the day-to-day management of this housing is the responsibility of individual State and Territory governments. Unfortunately, this means that I am not in a position to intervene or provide any advice around the sale of individual properties, like the one in Queenscliff.

You may be interested to know that the Australian Government is investing over \$6 billion for the construction of about 21,000 new social housing dwellings to be rented to low income Australians who have been homeless or struggling in the private rental market. This package is also funding urgent repairs and maintenance to around 80,000 existing public housing dwellings including 12,000 social housing dwellings that are currently vacant or will become uninhabitable without this work. Through this funding, we will be able to increase the levels of social housing that is available for Australians in need.

**QUESTION:** *Australia is a secular nation - when will law supersede lore - eg. when will opening a session of parliament with a christian rite be stopped?*

*- Susanne Martain, Australian Women's Intra Network*

**RESPONSE:**

Like many Parliaments in the Westminster tradition, practice and proceedings in the House of Representatives are established over many years – even centuries.

I understand that the issue of the prayers has been considered on a number of occasions by Members since 1901 and no decision to remove the prayer has been agreed.

The House is able to change the standing orders, and I am pleased that a very significant change to proceedings was introduced by this Parliament to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of this land, which is now observed prior to the prayer.

**QUESTION:** *How will the government ensure that no woman or women with children is forced to stay in a government detention centre whilst her claim for asylum is being processed?*

- *Annie Costin*

**RESPONSE:**

I am personally a strong opponent of children living in detention centres and am proud of the Gillard Labor Government's commitment not to hold children in immigration detention centres.

On 18 October 2010, the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship announced his intention to use existing powers under the Migration Act to progressively place significant numbers of unaccompanied minors and vulnerable families with children in residence determination arrangements (community detention). This allows vulnerable families to reside in the community until their visa status is resolved.

Residence determination arrangements for unaccompanied minors and vulnerable families will be rolled out progressively in partnership with community organisations over the coming months.

For women asylum seekers, the standard placement assessment criteria mean that their specific circumstances are taken into account when determining where they will be accommodated. These circumstances include any health issues, whether they have been subject to torture or trauma or are otherwise vulnerable.

**QUESTION:** *Is the government going to look at improving the system for separated couples by enabling fathers to pay the correct amount of regular maintenance to their female spouses and children after the couple have separated or divorced?*

*Many separated women are struggling financially to make ends meet, whilst the fathers are getting it easy by not paying the correct amount of child support?*

*Some of these women are on disability and single parent pensions.*

*Can the government impose much more severe penalties if fathers are in breach of their responsibilities towards paying or neglecting to pay maintenance for their children after they have left the home they all once shared?*

*I don't seem to think it's fair that women have to pay for all the children's expenses if their ex-partner decides to declare whatever income they feel like to the child support agencies...*

*Do you think the current laws are protecting women from this type of activity and if not, what can be done to make this a more fairer system for women in this country?*

*- Dianne Zebic, Professional Counsellor*

**RESPONSE:**

I agree that the issue of parenting support is a complex yet important one. It is essential to ensure that separated families are treated fairly and equitably. This is particularly important when we consider that women are more likely to retain care of children, more likely to face higher costs of living, and more likely to face financial insecurity upon retirement.

This Government is continually looking at ways to improve the system for separated parents to ensure they are both paying the correct amount of child support. It is a fundamental principle of the Child Support Scheme that parents contribute to their children according to their capacity and that children share in the financial resources of their parents.

In order to ensure that child support payments are made the Child Support Agency has extensive enforcement powers, including the ability to directly access wages, recover funds from bank accounts, tax returns or certain income support payments, and ultimately to take litigation action through a court.

The Child Support Scheme has the flexibility to consider those circumstances where a parent's taxable income is not an accurate reflection of their capacity to support their children. Parents who believe their child support assessment does not reflect the circumstances of their case can apply for a review of their

payments through the change of assessment process. The Australian Government is currently reviewing the change of assessment process to ensure child support assessments reflect the financial resources and earning capacity of both parents.

I am pleased that the Government made an election commitment to tougher measures to increase compliance and income accuracy where parents fail to meet their tax lodgement requirements. From 1 July 2011, more accurate default income arrangements will be introduced that use a parent's previous taxable income instead of a lower default income.

**QUESTION:** *What is the state or Commonwealth government doing to reduce the gap between Aboriginal and other Australians in life expectancy?*

*If we are going to close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people these issues have to be addressed.*

- Millie Ingram

**RESPONSE:**

The difference in life experience and expectations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is one of the biggest challenges faced by all Australian Governments. Every child in this country should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

I am proud to say that this Government has marshalled unparalleled resources and agreements to work across governments in pursuit of closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The Australian Government is determined, in partnership with Indigenous Australians and state and territory governments, to address Indigenous disadvantage and improving the lives of Indigenous Australians. In 2007-08, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to six ambitious targets for closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage with respect to life expectancy, child mortality, access to early childhood education, educational attainment and employment outcomes. COAG has also committed over \$4.6 billion to close the gap since 2007.

Importantly, the Australian Government has also committed \$1.2 billion since 2007 to continue the Northern Territory Emergency Response and a further \$1.5 billion since 2007 to other Indigenous specific measures.

You can find more information on the Government's policies and progress through [http://www.indigenous.gov.au/About/Pages/closing\\_gap.aspx](http://www.indigenous.gov.au/About/Pages/closing_gap.aspx).

**QUESTION:** *Australia's greatest natural resource is the minds of our children. What help can the government give towards encouraging primary schools to provide emotional support for pupils using proven interventions such as play and creative arts therapies? Will the government fund research to establish the mental health of Australian children?*

- *Monika Jephcott, Chief Executive, Play Therapy Australasia*

**RESPONSE:**

I agree with you that investing in children's early care and education transforms lives and it transforms our society.

We know that early childhood experiences are crucial in influencing the long-term consequences to a child's mental health, specifically their emotional and social wellbeing.

This Government funds a number of targeted initiatives under the FaHCSIA Family Support Program that are designed to support families and promote better outcomes for children.

I note in particular, the initiative KidsMatter Primary which aims to:

- improve the mental health and wellbeing of primary school students,
- reduce mental health problems amongst students, and
- achieve greater support for students experiencing mental health problems.

The Government has funded research to assess the mental health and wellbeing of children through its own relevant departments or external research agencies, including "How well are Australian infants and children aged 4 to 5 years doing?", September 2008, Melissa Wake, Ann Sanson, Donna Berthelsen, Pollyanna Hardy, Sebastian Misson, Katherine Smith, Judy Ungerer and the LSAC Research Consortium at [www.fahcsia.gov.au/about/publicationsarticles/research/socialpolicy/Pages/pr-ps-prps\\_36.aspx](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/about/publicationsarticles/research/socialpolicy/Pages/pr-ps-prps_36.aspx).

For more information you may like to visit:

[www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/progserv/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/progserv/Pages/default.aspx).  
[www.kidsmatter.edu.au](http://www.kidsmatter.edu.au)



**QUESTION:** *Is the Government committed to ensuring that more women receive Australian honours? There is a great discrepancy between the number of male and female recipients. Will the Government help ensure that a greater number of awards are conferred on women?*

- *Anonymous*

**RESPONSE:**

In the Australian honours system, appointments to the Order of Australia confer the highest recognition for outstanding achievement and service. I agree that the gap between the number of honours conferred on men compared to those conferred on women is very disappointing.

You may be interested to know that statistics indicate that once women are nominated for the Order of Australia, they are more likely than their male counterparts to be successful.

This means that we all need to ensure that as many women as possible are nominated, so that the Council for the Order of Australia has the best possible selection of candidates to choose from.

The Order of Australia operates on the principles of independence and freedom from political patronage and the Government cannot influence this process. Having said that, I will continue to promote the nomination of outstanding women in our community for the Order of Australia.

**QUESTION:** *International women's day Australia has been taken over by Unifem supported and generously funded by the government*

- *all without a word to the grassroots women who have provided the IWD national function for 15 years now*
- *the international gear campaign for a new UN women's body called UNWomen is supposed to work with civil society organisations not take them over*
- *is this a trend coming or will you review the situation and correct this outrage?*

- *International Women's Day Australia*

**RESPONSE:**

UNIFEM Australia and the National Women's Alliances have been funded to help as many Australian women as possible throughout 2011 to celebrate the centenary of International Women's Day. UNIFEM Australia was funded because of its recognition and connections at a national level and the Alliances were funded to do this work because they are the Government's primary vehicle for supporting the Australian women's movement.

I assure you that the funding provided to UNIFEM Australia for International Women's Day is specifically for the centenary celebrations. There is no intention to take away from the fine work that has been undertaken over many years by grassroots women's organisations.

I hope that there will be many events organised by women throughout the country – and I know that your website will be an important resource for women to know about events in their region. Your website had a very comprehensive list of Reclaim The Night events this year and you may know that I tweeted your website so that women around the country could mark this important event. I appreciate your work in communicating to women about events of this kind, and I know that there will be a link to your website on the IWD Centenary website.

The centenary of International Women's Day is an opportunity to demonstrate how much women have achieved and will continue to achieve when we work together. Thank you for your work over many years, particularly in communicating about events and issues that affect women.

**QUESTION:** *Do you and the Prime Minister support the current structure of the Women's Alliances?*

*Will you and the PM continue to see the role of the Alliances as providing policy advice as well as conducting projects?*

*Will the level of funding for the Office for Women and the Alliances be maintained or even, dare we say it, increased?*

*- Jane Baker, President, Australian Federation of Graduate Women*

**RESPONSE:**

Both the Prime Minister and I recognise that equality in this country is dependant on women having a strong voice on issues of national importance. The Women's Alliances provide a channel for the Government to engage with many of the diverse and passionate women's groups across Australia and access the full spectrum of their views and experiences.

In addition to the core funding announced in March 2010 (\$3.6M), the Government has provided additional establishment funding for the Alliances and funding for each Alliance to conduct activities to celebrate the centenary of International Women's Day in 2011.

The role of the Alliances is twofold. They will:

- bring together women's organisations and individuals from across Australia to share information, identify issues that affect them, and develop solutions, and
- engage actively with the Australian Government on policy issues as part of a better more informed and representative dialogue between women and government.

The core funding provided to the Alliances over three years is intended to assist them to be a strong voice to government, to expand their networks among women's organisation but also across government, and to increase their capacity to be strong advocates for Australian women and their issues. This includes policy advice and input across the whole of government, as well as one-off projects that promote gender equality in Australia.

Membership of the Alliances is a matter for each Alliance but I do know that the Alliances represent over 100 women's groups. It is a privilege to work with the women of the Alliances, and I look forward to receiving the benefit of their advice, feedback and innovative ideas over the coming years.

**QUESTION:** *Women's Alliance – how will this represent the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women in the Territory with only 1 person appointed to this group of Women and based in Alice Springs?*

*How will consultation be conducted in the Top End and who will be coordinating this?*

*Is there any evidence that the Top End and Remote Communities of the Northern Territory voices will be heard through the Women's Alliance Group?*

*Most importantly, what will happen to NATSIWG?*

*Will you take time to look at the Person Register to see if there are other Women here in the Territory who can speak for their country, and the issues and concerns which they face in the everyday lives?*

*It would be good to see you seek new Blood into decision making regarding the care and protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.*

*Will there be any funding available to assist in the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Centre in Darwin?*

*- Joy Cardona, Aboriginal Heritage, Co-ordinator NT Government*

**RESPONSE:**

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance (NATSIWA) will be an important mechanism to ensure that Indigenous women's voices are heard by government.

I agree that broad membership will be central to NATSIWA progressing its agenda. I understand that NATSIWA is currently in its establishment phase and is working towards expanding its membership and improving its governance and advocacy capabilities.

Rules surrounding the governance, membership and representation are matters for the Alliances themselves. However, I encourage each Alliance to seek broad membership from across Australia in a manner that will support its priorities and agenda.

If you would like more information about NATSIWA membership, or any of the other Alliances, information can be found on FaHCSIA's website:  
[www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women).

In relation to NATSIWG, at the Commonwealth, State, Territory and New Zealand Ministers' Conference on the Status of Women meeting in September 2010, Women's Ministers acknowledged the need for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's agenda to be recognised as a priority at all levels of government. The Ministers committed to an ongoing dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

**QUESTION:** *Former Senator Natasha Stott Despoja tabled a private member's bill in the Senate to ensure truth in pregnancy counselling services (as they are not subject to the trade practices Act), is there any chance you will continue her work (she organised a cross party coalition of women including Labor Senator Carol Brown and Liberal Senator Judith Adams in support of the bill)?*

- Anonymous

**RESPONSE:**

It is important that women can access the widest and best range of information and options in relation to her fertility.

This year, the Australian Government announced a maternity reform package which expanded and improved the existing National Pregnancy Telephone Counselling Helpline to deliver a 24 hour, seven days a week telephone helpline and information service for women, their partners and families, to provide greater access to maternity information and support before and after birth.

The Helpline will provide professional non-directive counselling on pregnancy options. Evidence-based information on all options is provided to women, their partners and families to assist them in making an informed decision.

The Pregnancy, Birth & Baby Helpline is fully funded by the Australian Government and the Helpline is being delivered by the National Health Call Centre Network through the Service Provider, the Royal District Nursing Service Inc.

This information is on the record and all contracts are selected using a transparent tendering process.

**QUESTION:** *As a woman who received a fatal prenatal diagnosis of my unborn baby and a genetic social worker currently undertaking a PhD in the field, I am interested in the gaps for women who receive prenatal diagnoses. In theory and based on ethical standards, counselling and psychosocial services should be offered to women after a poor or fatal diagnosis, during the decision making process and after the pregnancy to lessen the short and long term psychiatric consequences. Will you support a national network and a national support group providing services for women who receive a prenatal diagnosis?*

*- Stephanie Azri, Clinical and Genetic Social Worker*

**RESPONSE:**

Firstly, can I please extend my sincere sympathies to you. I am very sorry for your loss and I congratulate you on your work in raising awareness of this issue. Any initiative to enhance the provision of information and unbiased advice to women in these circumstances is commendable.

The Government's approach to the issue of maternity and pre-natal support is set out in the Maternity Reform Package announced this year. This package, with funding of \$120.5 million over four years, responds to the recently completed Maternity Services Review. An important element of the package is expanding and improving the existing National Pregnancy Telephone Counselling Helpline to deliver a 24 hour, seven days a week telephone helpline and information service for women, their partners and families, to provide greater access to maternity information and support before and after birth.

As part of this, women experiencing perinatal depression or grief following miscarriage, prenatal diagnosis or stillbirth can be directed to targeted, telephone-based peer support services provided by specialist organisations.

**QUESTION:** *What will your ministry do to ensure that national pregnancy support services are competitively tendered, rather than the current non-competitive process where the Department of Health and Ageing funds only one provider, despite this practice contradicting Australian Government procurement guidelines, and despite this having been drawn to the attention of the Department, with no response?*

*- Debbie Garratt RN, Executive Director, Real Choices Australia*

**RESPONSE:**

I understand that the Family Planning Program currently supports six organisations to deliver family planning, sexual and reproductive health related activities. Agreements with these family planning organisations will expire on 31 December 2010.

I'm pleased to advise that the National Family Planning Program will advertise shortly for applicants to provide services under an open, competitive tender process.

**QUESTION:** *How will your ministry ensure that women at risk of suffering negative events as a result of abortion, due to a lack of information, perceived alternatives, ambivalence about their decision, or previous mental health issues, receive the necessary support, intervention, screening and counselling they are entitled to as part of any medical or surgical process?*

*What is your ministry planning to do to ensure there is equal access to all Australian women to freely continue a pregnancy without the need to resort to an unwanted abortion?*

*- Debbie Garratt RN, Executive Director, Real Choices Australia*

**RESPONSE:**

I believe that all Australian women should have access to the best information and options in relation to their fertility.

This Government's Family Planning Program delivers family planning, sexual and reproductive health related activities. This Program is complemented by new Australian Government initiatives such as the Pregnancy, Birth and Baby Helpline.

This Helpline provides a coordinated entry point for women, their partners and families seeking a broad range of advice and information related to pregnancy and other maternity related services, including specialist and support services.

The Helpline will provide the professional non-directive counseling on pregnancy options. Through this Helpline, evidence-based information on all options is provided to women, their partners and families to assist them in making an informed decision.



**QUESTION:** *Australia has increasing rates of earlier sexual activity coupled with a rise in binge drinking among young people. We also have concerning rates of childhood and adult abuse and associated rates of unwanted and unplanned pregnancy, high rates of abortions especially among teenage women, sexually transmissible diseases, coupled with inadequate knowledge of and access to contraception. Australia can do much better to improve the sexual health and wellbeing of Australian women and men, whatever their age or genders.*

*With our partners Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia and Australian Reproductive Health Alliance, the Public Health Association has developed a Framework and Action Plan for a national Sexual and Reproductive Health Strategy for Australia on our website [www.phaa.net.au](http://www.phaa.net.au). We strongly urge the government to take a coordinated approach to these issues and are happy to be involved and support it. We do not believe that separate Men's and Women's Health Strategies adequately address how this could best be coordinated at the moment.*

*- Angela Taft for PHAA*

**RESPONSE:**

I agree that sexual health and binge drinking are important issues impacting our community – regardless of age and gender. Unfortunately, these issues are often taboo, so we must go to greater lengths to increase awareness and ensure that confidential and comprehensive support is available.

As you note, sexual and reproductive health is being considered in the development of the National Women's Health Policy.

In addition, the Australian Government is funding a range of measures to complement the National Women's Health Policy to ensure young men and women have access to information about sexual health.

The Government provides funding to six sexual and reproductive health organisations for practical pregnancy support, natural family planning and sexual and reproductive health education.

The Second National Sexually Transmissible Infections Strategy 2010-2013 was released in May 2010 to address the growing rates of STIs.

We have also provided \$9.4 million over three years to re-orient the existing National Pregnancy Telephone Counselling Helpline from July 2010. This will allow the service to provide a broader range of information, advice and referral services to women, their partners and families.

We know that our policies on issues that are often taboo must be grounded in sound evidence and that is why the Government continues to support the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health. In 2009, the Study produced a report examining the reproductive health of Australian women of

child bearing ages, this has added to our understanding of the key issues facing Australian women.

**QUESTION:** *As a Gyn Cancer survivor and knowing very little about Gyn health issues, I soon discovered this whole new world of women suffering in silence, with a lack of understanding, knowledge, stigma, embarrassment, who lacked the risks and symptoms causing a lack of power with women when it comes to Gyn/sexual health.*

*Many professionals labelling Gyn health under Reproductive health, however as 600,000 Australian women have Endometriosis, 10% Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, unknown numbers with sexual transmitted infections, approx. 4,500 Gyn cancers which don't include the pre cancerous conditions, hysterectomies, vulval conditions, menopause without a voice it is very clear this is not about having babies but women's conditions that dont only affect women but men/families of these women.*

*This lack of voice in the community is cause a huge cost to the government. There is a huge support network and acceptance for women with breast cancer - the time has come for all Gyn health conditions to have a voice.*

*I offer you a quick solution for the government to support my vision with my not for profit organisation for the International GYN Awareness Day.*

*Could you please explain what is being done for the future of Gyn Health and if you could take a closer look at the vision. How can you educate the Australian community about this imperative issue in an effort to break down some of the barriers and prevent the women suffering in silence that still exist to day with GYN/Sexual Health?*

*- Kath Mazzella, Gynecological Awareness Information Network Inc. (GAIN)*

**RESPONSE:**

I am very sorry to hear that you have been suffering with cancer and I wish you all the best for your health.

I have had a quick look at your website and I am encouraged by the network you have built to ensure that women are able to share experiences and support other women in similar situations. Congratulations on this excellent work and your bravery in transforming your experience into support for other women.

The Government recognises that gynaecological cancers are a major health issue for Australian women, and for this reason, provides funding for a number of programs and initiatives specifically aimed at promoting gynaecological health.

The Government's commitment to promoting gynaecological health among women is specifically reflected in its funding of the:

- National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre;
- National Centre for Gynaecological Cancers;

- National Cervical Screening Program; and
- Regional Cancer Centres.

The Australian Government supports a range of health promotion initiatives that specifically target women. The Jean Hailes Foundation has been funded to provide leadership for the National PCOS Alliance, comprised of key national leaders from research, clinical and community sectors, to improve the lives of Australian women with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) through education, research and evidence based health care.

**QUESTION:** *How can we re-orient Australia's entire overseas aid program including providing substantial increases in aid to put women and girls at the centre of all Aus-Aid planning and program delivery?*

- *Annie Costin*

**RESPONSE:**

The advancement of gender equality is an overarching principle of Australia's aid program. Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) including Goal 3 on gender equality and women's empowerment is at the heart of Australia's aid program. The Government's aid program supports a range of initiatives to improve women and girls' education and health, promote their economic empowerment, enhance their leadership skills and potential, and to respond to violence against women.

I am particularly proud that this Government has also committed to adopting an implementation plan for UN Resolution 1325, which recognises the importance of working with women to establish peace and security in conflict settings. This Government has also recently announced a \$14.5M contribution over 2 years to the newly renamed UN Women for initiatives to support women around the World.

**QUESTION:** *Women's Forum Australia questions the relative difference between adoptions in Australia (50 per annum) and terminations (~100,000). Would the new Government get behind reform of adoption processes in Australia to make adoption an easier, faster and cheaper option for women who are pregnant in difficult circumstances?*

*- Sara Hodgson, Women's Forum Australia*

**RESPONSE:**

I am committed to women having a wide range of options and the best of information when it comes to their fertility. State and Territory Governments have primary responsibility for adoptions, including responsibility for establishing and administering adoption legislation, preparing and supporting women and adoptive parents, assessing adoption applications, and providing post-placement support and supervision. The Commonwealth Government is responsible for establishing and managing overseas adoption programs, through the Attorney-General's Department.

I understand that the Commonwealth and States and Territories have been working together through Community and Disability Services' Ministers Conference working groups to achieve best practice for adoption in Australia.

**QUESTION:** *Are you proceeding to set up a panel of gender experts in OfW as announced early in 2010? If so what is the timing of this?*

*This is a very important low cost initiative to improve the quality of gender analysis in Government policy development and implementation.*

*- Helen L'Orange*

**RESPONSE:**

I agree that this panel of gender experts is a great initiative!

I have been advised by the Office for Women that they are currently finalising the panel of gender experts. I understand that successful panel members were notified in early November and contracts are being negotiated. I expect that the panel will be operational by early December.

I am looking forward to comprehensive consideration of gender in policies and programs across Government as Departments tap into this valuable resource.

**QUESTION:** *For years women and children have been the major 'collateral damage' in wars, natural disasters as well as in relation to education and health opportunities. After many years of conferences, meetings, seminars, petitions the United Nations established UN Women, an entity to address these issues and which will formally start on 1 January 2011. What is the Australian Minister for the Status of Women doing to ensure Australia plays a significant part in this important international initiative?*

*- Virginia Balmain, President UNAA Qld, Vice President UNAA*

**QUESTION:** *The need for the Australian Government to develop a National Action Plan (in consultation with NGOs) to implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 was included in the top 10 national issues for women which went forward to the last Labor government for consideration. We understand that considerable work has been done to progress such a National Action Plan.*

*Question: We seek your commitment to finalise an Australian National Action Plan for UNSCR1325 and other related later resolutions.*

*- Ruth Russell, Joint National Coordinator, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom – Australian Section*

**QUESTION:** *October 2010 marks the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 which for the first time recognised a) the impact of conflict on women and girls b) the significant and proactive role that women play in bringing about peace and security and c) their systematic exclusion from peace negotiations and post conflict reconstruction. As Australia moves towards bidding for a seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2012 (as announced recently by Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd) it is imperative that as per the requirements of being a member state of the United Nations, a National Action Plan is adopted and implemented. What steps will the government (and the opposition) take to ensure that (A) a National Action Plan on 1325 is developed, adopted and implemented (B) the National Action Plan on 1325 is developed adopted and implemented in consultation with women's organisations (C) the National Action Plan on 1325 is well resourced (in terms of financial and personnel resources) (D) ownership of the National Action Plan on 1325 rests with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Department of Defence with OFW playing a significant supportive role?*

*- Dr Anurandha Mundkur (on behalf of UNIFEM Australia Adelaide Chapter), Associate Director Gender Consortium Centre for Development Studies, Flinders University*

**RESPONSE:**

We know that women and children often suffer the worst consequences of conflict and violence, yet women can play a critical role in conflict prevention, resolution, and peace building. That's why Australian Government strongly



supports the efforts of the international community to end sexual violence in armed conflict and to support women's roles in peace-building.

Recently, this Government was proud to announce that Australia will provide \$14.5M to UN Women to support the fight against violence against women globally. Australia believes UN Women will strengthen coordination of global efforts to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women.

I am also very pleased to be delivering on this Government's election commitment to deliver a Women, Peace and Security Action Plan to respond to UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

I am happy to report that the development of this Plan is well under way and has already benefited from community input in its early stages. Close consultation with the non-government sector will be taken as the plan takes shape and I will release a draft of this Action Plan in the coming months. I look forward to the input of the sector on this significant issue for women across the world.

**QUESTION:** *The CEDAW Committee, in the July 30 2010 report called upon the Australian Government, to review the provision of accommodation for trafficked women into Australia with a view to offering more options and reduce stress on their victims. (Recommendation No 31) What steps will the Government be taking in response to this recommendation?*

*- Joan Kennedy PBVM, Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Human Rights (ACRATH)*

**RESPONSE:**

All forms of trafficking including trafficking for sexual servitude and labour exploitation should be condemned. I am personally committed to combating this insidious crime.

I have seen first hand the conditions of women and children trafficked in developing countries and I am compelled to ensure that the survivors of trafficking receive appropriate support and assistance in this country.

Support for victims of people trafficking in Australia is provided through the *Support for Victims of People Trafficking Program*, an important component of this Government's Anti-People Trafficking Strategy. Survivors of people trafficking receive accommodation, food, a living allowance, counselling, medical treatment, and access to legal and interpreter services. We have recently instituted a number of changes to the program to provide a more flexible, human rights-based victim-focused support program.

The Program is managed by the Office for Women and delivered by the Australian Red Cross. In accordance with the CEDAW Committee recommendations, the Office for Women is working with the Australian Red Cross to identify options for broadening the range of accommodation currently available to clients.

**QUESTION:** *Australia is a signatory to CEDAW, (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) including the optional protocol, also known as the Beijing Declaration. Clause 17 states*

*17. The explicit recognition and reaffirmation of the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility, is basic to their empowerment;*

*How can Australia meet this requirement when it has developed a legislative instrument that enables a medical practitioner to veto the practice of a midwife eligible for Medicare funding and in particular the individual decisions made by a pregnant/birthing woman? Will you guarantee childbearing women that if they make a decision that is not supported by a medical practitioner that they will still receive care and that a midwife will not be sanctioned if she supports a woman's informed consent and continues to provide care to her?*

*- Justine Caines*

**RESPONSE:**

I believe that a woman's ability to make an informed decision about her health and fertility is essential – as is the maternity care and support that she receives.

Central to this is the proper funding of diverse practitioner roles to provide a wide range of skilled services to the community. From 1 November 2010, Nurse Practitioners and Midwives will be able to access the Medicare Benefits Schedule and provide Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme medicines in the community.

For the first time highly skilled Nurse Practitioners and Midwives will be able to provide taxpayer subsidised services to patients outside of the public system in medical practices and the community.

Midwives will be able to deliver maternity care, including antenatal and postnatal care in the community, and undertake deliveries in a hospital.

**QUESTION:** *Health is determined by a range of factors. The Office for the Status of Women is in the unique position of sitting across a number of departments that impact on the health of women in Australia such as housing, education, transport etc. How do you plan to address the social determinants of health? Are you committed to implementing meaningful joined-up action across government departments to improve women's health?*

- *Women's Health Victoria*

**QUESTION:** *When can we expect to see a new National Women's Health Policy, as promised prior to the 2007 election?*

*We would also like information about the new National Women's Health Program, which will be necessary to implement the aims of the Policy. Without a Program, the Policy will be words on a piece of paper, without tangible benefits for women.*

*We would like to know when the women's health services sector can expect to see a meaningful funding increase, after almost 15 years of neglect?*

*By way of background, AWHN produced a New National Agenda Position Paper in 2007 and held a Summit at Parliament House, Canberra, as part of a project to put women's health back on the Australian political agenda. A few weeks later, the Labor Party announced that, if elected, it would develop a new national women's health policy. AWHN had been working for that commitment since 1995.*

*However, the women's health movement has been bitterly disappointed. Despite a submission process involving approximately 100 major submissions, a consultation process and numerous communications between AWHN and ministers in the Rudd government, no women's health policy was announced, much less implemented. The health reform that was announced had a strong focus on hospitals and medical services and community-based, preventive, primary health services, including women's health services, were seriously sidelined.*

*The focus on hospital and doctors contravened myriad Commonwealth pronouncements about the importance of prevention and population health. The women's health services sector is important because it is the only sector providing holistic, prevention focused care for women. Together with State-run community health centres, of which only a few remain, and Aboriginal community controlled health centres, a comprehensive range of services is provided, with a focus on those groups most at risk. It is in the community health sector that the multiple social determinants of health outcomes are recognised and that preventive programs are devised in response. It is here that equity in access to care is taken seriously, that community members participate in the shaping of services and that the focus on health promotion and disease prevention is strong. International research shows clearly that strong primary health care services are an essential component of improved population health.*

*As well as the absence of a National Women's Health Policy and Program, funding for women's health and other women's services was completely neglected, as it had been throughout the Howard years. The women's health services sector has always been poorly funded and the situation has become critical. Under the Rudd government, the contributions of low paid women workers continued to be grossly undervalued, resulting in high levels of frustration and cynicism among women working at the coalface because they cannot provide services for which there is a patent need. Forward planning is impossible and even simple matters, like leasing premises, has become a major problem.*

*The services that support women and children who have experienced violence are also poorly funded and staff underpaid. Almost 40 years after women were forced to set up their own services, data shows that one in every two women escaping violence and looking for accommodation is still turned away.*

*- Dr Gwendolyn Gray, Convenor, Australian Women's Health Network*

**RESPONSE:**

I am pleased to advise that the Government has made a commitment to develop a new National Women's Health Policy. This policy will seek to improve the health and wellbeing of Australian women through a focus on social determinants of women's health, including addressing prevention, health inequities and promoting the participation of women in health decision making and management.

The Policy, which is currently in its final stages of development and which is being progressed by the Minister for Health, Nicola Roxon, will be released this year.

**QUESTION:** *Many women's services are currently operating without the supportive framework of a current National Women's Health Policy. When will this policy be released?*

*Will the federal government commit to quarantining monies provided to the state and territory governments to continue to fund women's services?*

*Primary Health Care considers health from a social determinants perspective and includes prevention. However, when federal politicians mention "primary health care" they seem to be referring to primary medical care. With primary health care being presented as a major part of the National Health and Hospital Reforms will the federal government commit to this broader and more accurate interpretation of the term?*

*Many women's health services work collaboratively with government, nongovernment services and general practitioners. The National and Health and Hospital Reform documents do not mention where women's health services will sit in this new model. Will the federal government commit to ensuring that women's health services continue to receive funding under these reforms?*

*Each state and territory has a range of women's services operating on a local and state-wide basis. However, many national initiatives are based out of Victoria – leading to difficulties in service access from other states. Will the federal government commit to funding conditions for these national organisations that ensure that these organisations work with relevant state or territory services? Additionally, will reporting requirements for these national services include measurements to ensure that this happens?*

*- Kathy Faulkner, Manager, Women's Health Queensland Wide Inc*

**RESPONSE:**

I am pleased to advise that the Government has made a commitment to develop a new National Women's Health Policy. This policy will seek to improve the health and wellbeing of Australian women through a focus on social determinants of women's health, including addressing prevention, health inequities and promoting the participation of women in health decision making and management.

The Government will continue to work collaboratively with the States and Territories, women's health services and general practitioners to ensure a cohesive national approach for women's health.

**QUESTION:** *The status of women in Australian society today is in a stronger position than ever in the past, and although there is still much work to be done, we also need to stop and recognise the efforts of those brave pioneering women in all facets of society who dared defy convention and who worked to raise the status and profile of women, making Australia what it is today.*

*As we set a pathway for the future, what strategies do you, Kate, as Minister for the Status of Women, plan to employ to ensure that these pioneering women are not forgotten in the history of Australian society and that their special stories, (such as those captured in the book 'First Females Above Australia' a tribute to female pioneer pilots of Australia, by Rosemary Arnold) act to inspire young women of today and tomorrow?*

- Cinthia Del Grosso, Professional Development Services

**RESPONSE:**

I agree that it is important that we take every opportunity to celebrate pioneering women and their achievements.

I recently attended a celebration of Australia's first equal opportunity legislation in South Australia and I was pleased to be able to reflect on the work that has been done by remarkable reformers who have made such a difference to the world that I was lucky enough to be born into, to be raised in, to study in and to work in. For this reason, I like to take every opportunity to acknowledge and thank these reformers.

It is my hope that the centenary of International Women's Day in 2011 will provide us with 12 months to pay tribute to the extraordinary women who broke down so many barriers throughout the last 100 years. I know that UNIFEM, the Women's Alliances and women's groups from around Australia have many events planned to celebrate the women who have come before us and achieved so much.

But, I also hope that these celebrations are a reminder that it is time for another band of women and men to step up and carry the baton and continue the reforms that we need to ensure women's equal place in our society.

Naturally, there is not just one year in which we celebrate the achievements of women – it is my hope that we will continue to remember the efforts of trailblazers, both those women whose names we know and those who have not made it into the history books.

Non-government organisations also do an excellent job in preserving and promoting women's history. You may be interested in these two organisations and their websites which aim to preserve and disseminate women's history: the Australian Women's Register <http://www.womenaustralia.info/> and the Australian Women's History Forum <http://www.womenshistory.com.au/default.asp>.

**QUESTION:** *What is the Minister prepared to do to provide real help and support to women who experience unexpected pregnancies who wish to birth and keep their child but lack that support?*

*What is the Minister prepared to do to provide baby safe havens for women who wish to birth their child but are unable to care for him/her but wish to leave their baby anonymously in a safe place?*

*- Teresa Martin, State President, Cherish Life Queensland*

**RESPONSE:**

If any mother feels concerned about her pregnancy or her baby, I urge her to contact the Pregnancy, Birth and Baby Helpline which provides free, confidential advice. This Helpline will be able to direct her to providers of both immediate and ongoing support. The Helpline number is 1800 88 24 36

In relation to your question about women who chose to give birth, but are unable to care for their child, the Pregnancy, Birth and Baby Helpline provides non-directive counselling on options such as adoption, both prior to birth and throughout the first 12 months of a baby's life.

It is important that we distribute this number widely in the community so that all women can access the confidential support that they need.



**QUESTION:** *Australian women demand legal safe free on demand abortion - when can we expect the decriminalisation of abortion nationwide and inclusion of the service on Medicare?*

*- Susanne Martain, Australian Women's Intra Network*

**QUESTION:** *What action will you take to ensure the abortion drug, RU486, will be made more easily available?*

*RU486 is considered a safe, legal treatment in Australia. However, distribution of RU486 remains tightly controlled by the Therapeutic Goods Administration. A young couple in Cairns are due to face court next month on charges relating to abortion because they brought RU486 into the country after obtaining the drug from relatives overseas. They were allowed through customs after declaring they had the drug.*

*- Lynn Muir, Women's Abortion, Action Campaign*

**QUESTION:** *What is your Ministry planning to do to ensure there is equal access for all Australian women to safe, free abortion?*

*Will you recognise the abject failure of the States to achieve this especially in Queensland where a young woman is being prosecuted for procuring an abortion, women have to see a psychiatrist before being "allowed" to terminate a severely abnormal pregnancy and abortion services have been severely restricted due to legal concerns?*

*Will your Ministry take up the challenge to take on this issue as a Federal matter and obtain the consent of the States to do so? (as was achieved for Gun laws under the Howard government)*

*- Dr Heather McNamee, Pro Choice Cairns*

**QUESTION:** *How will you be working as Minister for Women, to increase and ensure accessibility of RU486 for all women in Australia?*

*Will you restore and secure Federal Government funding to organisations that advocate for women's rights?*

*Will you support a publicly funded feminist abortion service, with services available throughout Australia?*

*- Christine Smith, Women's Abortion Action Campaign*

**RESPONSE:**

While the Commonwealth has responsibility for the processes by which medicines are regulated, the legislation relating to abortions is the responsibility of the States and Territories. As you know, each jurisdiction has

different legislation governing the circumstances where pregnancy can be terminated.

My vote about the process for approval of the availability of RU486 is a matter of parliamentary record. I support this drug being subject to the processes of the Therapeutic Goods Administration.

RU486 is not presently available for general marketing in Australia to the consumer. The decision to market a therapeutic product in Australia can only be made by a sponsor who must first submit an application for approval to the TGA. This is not a process in which the Government can intervene.

The Commonwealth Government has no plans to limit the availability of Medicare funding for lawful terminations of pregnancy.

**QUESTION:** *Australia is one of the countries credited with pioneering gender-responsive budgeting in the 1980's and AusAID (Australian Government Overseas Aid Program) actively promotes gender responsive budgeting in emerging nations. However, gender responsive budgeting is NOT just about releasing a Women's Budget Statement. In fact as Rhonda Sharp, a leading feminist economist from Australia puts it, gender responsive budgeting is not about separate budgets for men and women or about budgets being equally divided between men and women. It is about undertaking an analysis of the needs of men and women and where needs are different allocations also need to be different. The government's Women's Budget Statements tend to focus only on public expenditure (and that too mainly on specifically targeted expenditures to women to meet that particular needs - in reality this forms a very small percentage of the total budget of a government). Adopting and integrating a gender perspective in the budget requires attention to the total budget. What steps will the government (and the opposition) take to ensure that while making decisions regarding budgetary allocations a gender responsive budgeting approach is adopted - one that looks both revenue (the way policies are financed) and expenditure (across all three categories of public expenditure - i.e. specific expenditure targeted at men and women to address their particular needs for example women's health programs or domestic violence services; equal employment opportunity expenditure by government agencies on their employees for example paid parental leave; and general or mainstream budget expenditures by government agencies which make good and services available to the whole community but which are assessed for the gender impact for example transport or agricultural support services?*

*- Dr Anurandha Mundkur (on behalf of UNIFEM Australia Adelaide Chapter), Associate Director Gender Consortium Centre for Development Studies, Flinders University*

**RESPONSE:**

These are a number of mechanisms in place to ensure that a gender lens is applied to policies and Budget allocations. The Social Policy Committee of Cabinet, my Department and my colleagues in the Status of Women caucus committee provide advice on the gender dimensions of submissions to Cabinet and across the policy cycle to ensure gender equality is considered in the early stages of policy development.

To provide further support to Commonwealth Government departments through the policy and budget cycle, this Government is establishing a Gender Panel of experts for Departments to access to get the best advice on contemporary gender initiatives, issues and perspectives. Panel members have a high level of expertise across a broad range of services, including research, evaluation, policy advice, gender analysis training and the development gender mainstreaming of educational materials.

I hope that over the next term we will see more consideration of gender in policies and programs across government, particularly in the Budget Cycle, as Departments tap into this valuable resource.