

QUESTION: *As Australia is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which places obligations on the Australian government to prevent discrimination on the basis of sex and achieve equality, will you be addressing the gender pay gap in Australia and enacting further legislative reform in this area? What specific types of reform will you be pursuing?*

- Diann Rodgers-Healey, Executive Director, Australian Centre for Leadership for Women

QUESTION: *What strategies does the government have to reduce the wealth gap between men and women?*

- Jane Baker, President, Australian Federation of Graduate Women

QUESTION: *Women's work is underpaid and undervalued.*

Given there is a growing pay gap between the sexes (the gender pay gap has worsened since the activities of the women's liberation movement in early '70's – ACTU campaign 66 days in the red), is the Federal government prepared to address (including contributing to funding the gap closure) the issue of closing the pay gap and working towards recognizing the value of feminized jobs commonly associated with education, health, and care so that women's work has equal value to traditionally masculinized jobs such as in the highly paid mining sector?

Lisa Fitzpatrick, State Secretary, Australian Nursing Federation (Victorian Branch)

QUESTION: *Next year is 100 years of women's organised global protest of misogyny i.e. International Women's Day is 100 in March 2011 - when will Australian employers be held accountable for women being paid unequally for equal work or does this require a class action by women for backpay?*

- Susanne Martaine, Australian Women's Intra Network

QUESTION: *Will you support the principles of equal pay in the community service award case, currently in front of the Fair Work tribunal?*

- Eva Cox

QUESTION: *What is the Minister's current position on the Pay Equity Test Case in Fair Work Australia for the Social and Community Services Sector, and if she supports a pay increase for employees is she aware of the implications for services in affording these pay increases without supplementary government funding?*

- Kerriann Dear, Co-Director, Queensland Working Women's Service Inc

RESPONSE

I absolutely support women receiving the same opportunities as men - especially equal remuneration for work.

There is a real gap between women and men in the wealth they accumulate through their life course and that this has a significant bearing on the economic security of women, particularly in their retirement. We know, for example, that women are over-represented among those reliant on pensions and that women have only half the superannuation savings of men.

The Australian Government is firmly committed to pay equity in Australia. Pay equity represents fairness for all Australians and will enable increased participation of women in the workforce. That is why the Government moved to get rid of the draconian Work Choices laws, which had a devastating impact on the pay and conditions of women workers and created Fair Work Australia in its place.

The Government has introduced the nation's first ever paid parental leave scheme, so women are not penalised for taking time out of the workforce to have children – and the Government has more than doubled our investment in child care affordability assistance over the next four years.

The Government also enshrined the fundamental principle of equal pay for work of equal value in the *Fair Work Act*, and ensured that the equal pay principle in the *Fair Work Act* was a broader principle than had ever been in federal legislation before.

It is on the basis of this principle that the Australian Services Union (ASU) has been able to bring a case to Fair Work Australia for equal remuneration for workers in social, community and disability services.

The Australian Government's submission in the Australian Services Union case makes it clear that the Government strongly supports pay equity and acknowledges that much of the vital work performed in the social and community services sector is undervalued.

I want to emphasise that our commitment is absolutely unchanged - the Government is supportive of this case going forward.

The Government has implemented a number of measures to help address the wealth gap between women and men in Australia – and plan to build on them throughout the next term. These have included a significant increase in the pension from September 2009 and the the Stronger, Fairer, Simpler tax reforms, which are providing better superannuation concessions for over three million low income earners, many of whom are women.

Over the next three years, we are looking forward to building on these initiatives.

The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) and its underlying legislation the *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999* (the EOWW Act) play a key role in holding employers accountable for pay equity.

The Government initiated a review to examine the effectiveness and efficiency of the EOWW Act and Agency in assisting employers to remove barriers to equal employment opportunities in Australian workplaces. The Government is committed to retaining the Agency and improving the legislation to ensure it is better placed to respond to current challenges. Existing reporting requirements will be streamlined and measurable indicators of outcomes for women and men in the workplace will be adopted. All in all the reforms will reduce the reporting costs for business while improving gender equality and workplace flexibility.

As detailed in the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2009 report, *Accumulating Poverty*, we know that the wealth gap between women and men stems in large part from the broken work patterns of women and the fact that they continue to bear a disproportionate share of the responsibility for unpaid caring and household work.

One of the Government's key intentions therefore is to ensure men's engagement in the sharing of unpaid care and to provide families with the support that enables them to make choices around work and life balance.

With the pay gap at \$1M over a working life, we have a long way to go. It is my intention to introduce some practical reforms that will make a difference in the lives of all women, particularly in maintaining their economic security.

QUESTION: *As a professional international development consultant who is encountering ageism in job search situations I would like to ask Minister Ellis what policies and agendas will be undertaken to assist professional women who wish to remain in the workforce to counter the negative attitudes about mature women workers and older women in the workplace.*

- Pamela Harris, International Development Consultant

RESPONSE:

Sadly this is an issue facing many older women in the workplace. Data on retirement from the ABS shows two important trends. Women are precluded from employment as they age, with over a ten year difference between the average age of retirement for men (58) and women (47). In addition, women who have retired are returning to work because of financial reasons at much higher rates than men.

It is a priority as Minister for Employment Participation that we ensure that the labour market is accessible to all Australians – regardless of their age.

We know that this is a significant concern for too many Australians. The majority of age discrimination complaints received by the Australian Human Rights Commission in 2008-09 related to employment. The Commission has also told us that unlawful age discrimination has emerged as a serious disincentive to mature age workers continuing in paid work.

The Government is serious about removing barriers that prevent older Australians from participating in the workforce and has established the Consultative Forum on Mature Age Participation to provide advice on addressing barriers to workforce participation. The Forum's work will be supported by research into negative employer attitudes and age discrimination, and by an Interdepartmental Committee of Commonwealth Government departments, including a representative of the Office for Women. The Forum includes the Commissioner responsible for Age Discrimination, Ms Elizabeth Broderick, who is also the Sex Discrimination Commissioner.

Forum members called for the establishment of a dedicated Age Discrimination Commissioner. As a result, this Government introduced legislation to establish a dedicated Age Discrimination Commissioner to advocate for the rights of older Australians, handle complaints under the Age Discrimination Act, and help tackle discrimination in the workplace and the community.

We know that mature age workers bring significant benefits to the workplace, including a strong sense of loyalty, reliability and insight. The new Commissioner will encourage employers and the broader community to appreciate these important qualities and the remarkable skills older Australians bring to the workplace and their communities.

I am very concerned to hear that you are experiencing discrimination. I encourage you to contact the Human Rights Commission to get some advice on making a confidential complaint.

QUESTION: *Section 65 of the Fair Work Act 2009 provides that an eligible employee has a right to request of their employer access to two important new rights for employees who are either the parent of or responsible for, a child. Those rights are the right to request flexible working arrangements and the right to request extended (unpaid) parental leave, with the right to reasons for any refusal of such a request.*

To ensure that employers are upholding the Fair Work Act, will the government provide an annual report on the status of section 65 of the Fair Work Act 2009 identifying areas that are impacting the development of flexible workplaces and report on:

- *The reasons provided by employers for accepting or refusing to grant a request for flexibility and unpaid parental leave*
- *Organisations which are non-compliant and the recommendations provided to ensure compliance*

- Diann Rodgers-Healey, Executive Director, Australian Centre for Leadership for Women

RESPONSE:

Under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, the General Manager of Fair Work Australia is required to conduct research and report every three years on the circumstances in which employees make requests for flexible working arrangements, the outcome of such requests and the circumstances in which such requests are refused.

QUESTION: *I am writing on behalf of the National Working Women's Centres (NWWC).*

Since 1977 in South Australia, 1994 in Queensland and 1994 in the Northern Territory, the Working Women's Centres (WWC)s have provided advice, information, support and advocacy to women on all workplace matters. The centres develop resources and initiate and implement training programs on issues facing women in the workplace, respond to issues related to cultural diversity at work and actively promote equal employment opportunity for women through policy development.

The WWCs also provides advocacy and advice to women in the various antidiscrimination and industrial relations jurisdictions and assist clients with direct resolution of employment issues with their employers. The women who contact the WWCs are often in precarious employment and in vulnerable financial situations.

They are not union members and generally have limited negotiating power.

In the 2009-2010 financial year, the WWCs provided assistance to 5500 women. Since foundation, the WWCs have been funded by the Federal Department of Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and it's predecessors. All centres are also in receipt of some state funding. This funding has allowed us to assist vulnerable working women, to provide support for those most affected by the recent global economic crisis, to provide training on work-related matters to the community and to provide a voice in the formulation of policy and law that may affect working women. The centres have however experiences an inconsistent funding approach by the Federal Government with funding not guaranteed or ongoing from year to year. A recent Federal Government Review and communications from the then Minister the Hon Julia Gillard resulted in a formal commitment from the Government to provide more sustainable funding in partnership with the states and by way of a triennial agreement. However we have currently been offered a two year contract with the highest amount for the Centres being \$136,300 each year. With budgets considerably higher than this required to deliver services the Federal funding component remains small despite referral of legislative powers from the states to the Federal Government in the jurisdiction in which we most commonly work.

The previous Minister the Hon Tanya Plibersek was aware of our situation and lent considerable support to assisting us in achieving more sustainable funding.

We would like to ask the incoming Minister for Women the Hon Kate Ellis the following questions:

Is the Minister aware of the work of the WWC's and the issues surrounding our funding?

Would the Minister be prepared to assist in initiating discussions with the Federal Minister for Workplace Relations to address our ongoing funding issues?

- Kerriann Dear, Co-Director, Queensland Working Women's Service Inc

RESPONSE:

I am indeed aware of the excellent work being performed by the Working Women Centres and of the importance of the service they provide. I have visited one of these centres in my electorate in Adelaide and I have seen firsthand how Women's Working Centres assist countless women every year.

I am pleased to confirm the Government's commitment to ongoing funding arrangements in partnership with state and territory Governments.

I understand the WWCs were advised by the Hon Julia Gillard MP in June this year of funding arrangements to apply from 1 July 2010 to 30 June 2012.

The Fair Work Ombudsman is the agency responsible for negotiating funding arrangements and associated contracts with the WWCs. The Fair Work Ombudsman has advised that issues that you have raised relating to funding levels beyond 2012 will be discussed at the next Workplace Relations Ministers Council meeting.

QUESTION: Will the government eliminate HECS debts for LSES single parent families?

When and how is the federal government planning to address inequity and poverty traps and education inequities for women in particular low income and single parent families and mature age students?

When and how will the government address female poverty over a life time and address the impacts this has on the next generation?

When will the government address the failure of equity policies to address the social exclusion of LSES kids and families in public schools, TAFE and university education?

Single parents and HECS repayments:

- *Currently according to research ("What Price the clever Country NATSEM 2008):*
- *A typical single female parent with two children will never clear their HECS debt*
- *A male single parent with two children in comparison will take 14 years clear their HECS debt*
- *HECS repayments kick in at a low salary threshold regardless of circumstances or number of dependent children and/or young adults in the family who are dependent on youth allowance (which is based in large part on parental means tests)*
- *If you are a single parent on a Low income, this reduction of take home pay as a result of automatic HECS repayment is not included in income calculations by housing authorities or Centrelink and kicks in often when children are in school and the parent is least able to afford it.*
- *It is a big disincentive for the most impoverished and low income families to return to study to improve employment prospects and this contributes to the poverty trap faced by many poor families. It compounds issues surrounding affordable housing and low or no superannuation for women in particular heading towards "retirement" age.*
- *The education tax benefit for computer expenses is only payable to those who have sufficient income to earn enough taxable income to purchase computers for school age children and thereby claim the benefit. This group is arguably the group with highest need of home computers to aid education.*
- *Single parents are unable to escape the financial responsibility of their young adult children until the age of 25 (currently being slowly reduced to 22 years of age).*
- *This has a particularly big impact on LSES families who have no assets or home ownership. Single parents who are in the poorest households have no chance to build assets or create financial security for old age or family security but rather operate on a survival basis.*
- *Currently whilst State governments have equity policies on paper, public schools are unable to subsidize extracurricular activities for kids and families who are unable to afford them creating a self selecting system of social*

exclusion that begins as soon as school activities become cost based. This includes excursions, school choirs and bands and other similar user pay activities. It reinforces class differences and limits aspiration of LSES children from kindergarten.

- Clare Ellis

RESPONSE:

It is of the utmost importance that there should be no barriers preventing participation in education, for all Australian families. But I know that the cost of several years of education can add up.

Your question covers a few areas, so I have outlined some information that might be helpful. If you require additional information, or if you have more concerns, please contact my office.

HELP debts have no interest and have income contingent repayment arrangements. Repayments are required only when a person's income reaches the minimum threshold for compulsory repayment (\$44, 912 for 2010–11). Should the requirement to make a compulsory HELP repayment cause serious hardship, an application may be made to the Tax Commissioner to defer the compulsory repayment in an income year. More information can be obtained from the Australian Taxation Office (ATO) website at www.ato.gov.au or by calling 1300 650 225. Further, if a HELP debt is never repaid because of low income, the Government meets the cost. The Australian Government also offers reductions in HELP repayments or debts through a HECS-HELP Benefit for certain graduates that go on to work in related professions.

More information about HELP is available on the Going to Uni website at www.goingtouni.gov.au.

The recent report on the Government's review of Australia's future tax system (the Henry Review) included a number of recommendations regarding income support payments and improvements in the financial returns from employment. Further deliberations on the nation's taxation system will be considered at a public forum to be held by mid 2011, which will re-examine the Henry Tax Review and consider the economic and social effects of taxation reform. Following that forum, the Government will hold a debate on tax reform in the Australian Parliament, enabling all Senators and Members to express their views.

The Australian Government's reforms to student income support increase support for mature aged students. Mature aged students may qualify for Austudy, a means tested payment for full-time students aged 25 years and over who are doing an approved course at an approved institution or undertaking a full-time Australian Apprenticeship.

The Government has introduced scholarships as an entitlement for university students receiving student payments, including Austudy. The new annual Student Start-up Scholarship will be valued at over \$2128 in 2011, and be indexed in following years. It will be paid to university students each year they are receiving student payments.

Changes to scholarship arrangements also mean that, from 1 April 2010, equity and merit-based scholarships are exempted from being treated as assessable income for means testing under the Social Security Act 1991, up to the value of \$6762 in 2010.

Other features of the Government's reforms which will benefit mature aged students include:

- the extension of Austudy and other student payments to all masters by coursework study, from 1 January 2012
- an increase to the personal income threshold to allow students to earn \$400 a fortnight (up from \$236) without having their payments reduced, from 1 July 2012.

Schools

The Smarter Schools National Partnership for Low Socio-economic Status School Communities is providing \$1.5 billion over seven years (2008-09 to 2014-15) to support significant reform in over 1,600 schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students. This funding is targeted to improve student engagement, wellbeing and educational outcomes, promote social inclusion and reduce Indigenous disadvantage.

Schools are working with their local communities and education authorities to implement reform activities that will generate the best educational outcomes for their students, support wellbeing and will foster a successful transition to further education, work and active participation in the community.

The Partnership is contributing to broader social and economic objectives and improving understanding about effective intervention that can be implemented beyond the schools participating in the Partnership.

Vocational Education and Training

The Australian Government is establishing Trade Training Centres to help increase the proportion of students achieving Year 12 or an equivalent qualification. An important step in achieving this increase is to ensure students have access to high-quality, relevant trade training opportunities that engage and encourage them to complete their studies while opening pathways for future employment.

The Program will help address national skills shortages in traditional trades and skills in local demand by improving the relevance and responsiveness of trade training programs in secondary schools. Schools can apply for funding to build new, or upgrade existing trade or vocational education and training facilities that will deliver qualifications in a range of traditional trades including metal and engineering, automotive, building and construction, electro-technology and commercial cookery.

In the initial stages of the Program, funding has been prioritised to secondary schools with the greatest need and capacity to benefit from a new or upgraded Trade Training Centre. In allocating funds, priority has been given to applications that support secondary school communities with Indigenous students, and students from rural, regional or other disadvantaged communities such as Low Socio Economic Status households.

Higher Education

In 2009 the Government announced its ambition that by 2020, 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at the undergraduate level will be of people from a low SES background.

The major barriers to increased higher education participation by students from low socio-economic backgrounds include previous educational attainment, low awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education resulting in little aspiration to participate, and the need for financial assistance, academic and personal support once enrolled.

In 2009 the Government allocated \$433 million over four years to be disbursed through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program.

- The Partnerships component includes \$108 million over four years for a new program to link universities with low SES schools and vocational education and training providers. Funding will provide schools and vocational education and training providers with links to universities, exposing their students to people, places and opportunities beyond the scope of their own experiences, helping teachers raise the aspirations of their students.
- The Participation component includes a further \$325 million over four years to be provided to universities as a financial incentive to expand their enrolment of low SES students, and to fund the intensive support needed to improve their completion and retention rates.

Further support for people from a low SES background will be provided by compacts and performance funding agreements with universities. The recently released draft Performance Funding for Universities Guidelines provide detailed information on how individual performance targets will be agreed between universities and the Government.

More information on the Government's commitment to support people from a low SES background to access higher education can be found at:
http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Documents/PDF/Additional%20Report%20-%20Transforming%20Aus%20Higher%20ED_webaw.pdf

Information on Performance Funding can be found at:

<http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Policy/Pages/Compacts.aspx>

Student Income Support Reforms

The Government's reforms to student income support aim to ensure a fairer and more equitable allocation of resources to increase access to, and better target, support for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. The reforms respond to the recommendations of the Bradley Higher Education Review that related to student income support arrangements. By improving access to support for students, the package will provide the assistance essential for encouraging and enabling low SES students, including those from rural backgrounds and Indigenous students, to participate in higher education. The reforms are therefore central to achieving the Government's education outcome objectives of:

- 40 per cent of 25–34 year olds attaining a bachelor level qualification by 2025; and
- 20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments in higher education being students from low socio-economic status backgrounds by 2020.

Details of the changes to student income support can be found at www.deewr.gov.au

QUESTION: *Could you please explain the government's position and rationale for setting the rate of Parenting Payment (single) so far below that of other pensions, in spite of evidence that this will have an impact on child poverty?*

- Gill Pearce, Program Manager, Policy and Research, Carers Victoria

RESPONSE:

Australia has an income support system that is designed to be a safety net for people who, for any number of reasons, are unable to support themselves.

Parenting Payment is the main income support payment available to people with sole or primary responsibility for the care of a young child, and provides a safety net for parents who would otherwise be at risk of hardship. Parenting Payment Partnered is an allowance payment while Parenting Payment Single is a pension type payment.

The difference between the rates and income tests of allowances and pensions reflects the different roles of these two types of payments. Allowances are designed to be adequate to live on while providing sufficient incentives for people to join or return to the workforce. In contrast, pensions are designed to acknowledge that some people face additional barriers. The Government recognises the valuable role that parents play in society by raising their children and appreciates that like pensioners, sole parents also have caring responsibilities that can make it difficult to participate in paid employment.

To maintain its real value, Parenting Payment is increased each year in March and September in line with increases in the cost of living as measured by the Consumer Price Index (the cost of a 'basket' of many different goods and services, including food, housing, transport, clothing and health care). Parenting Payment Single is also set to at least 25 per cent of Male Total Average Weekly Earnings to ensure that the rate of this payment is benchmarked to changes in wages.

The 2009–10 Budget included a number of measures to assist people receiving working age payments to develop or upgrade their skills and qualifications so that they can move into work as the economy improves and, in the case of Parenting Payment, as their caring responsibilities permit. The Training Supplement is a temporary additional payment of \$41.60 per fortnight for new and existing recipients of Newstart Allowance and Parenting Payment who have not completed Year 12 or equivalent, or who have a trade or vocational qualification which could be upgraded to better equip them to find future employment.

To qualify for the Training Supplement, people receiving Newstart or Parenting Payment need to fully meet their activity test or participation requirements by commencing an approved Certificate Level I to Certificate Level IV course between 1 July 2009 and 30 June 2011. In addition, recipients of these payments who take up approved study are eligible for the \$208 Education Entry Payment. These payments are available to help people

with costs associated with starting study or training, such as course fees, books or equipment.

In addition, Pensioner Education Supplement is a \$62.40 per fortnight (full-rate or \$31.20 standard rate) payment designed to help certain disadvantaged pensioner groups, such as single parents and people with disability, with the costs of study. It is hoped that through study they will find work and improve their circumstances. Assistance is provided over a defined period to help recipients to gain an initial qualification, up to a postgraduate level, that would make them competitive in the labour market.

The Government provides concessions for unemployed people, including Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme prescription items and certain medical services. These concessions are accessible through the Health Care Card (HCC) issued to all Newstart Allowance recipients. Government concession cards are also used by state, territory and local governments, as well as some businesses, as a way to provide a range of assistance and discounts to selected groups of people. Concessions for goods and services, such as electricity discounts, to holders of certain government concession cards are a choice made by the concession provider. Pensioner Concession Card holders in all states and territories also receive valuable core concessions. These include reductions on fares on public transport, council and municipal rates including water and sewerage, electricity bills, and motor vehicle registration charges.

QUESTION: *What is the state or Commonwealth government doing to stop the erosion of pensioners rise by community housing companies?*

- Millie Ingram

RESPONSE:

Most community housing providers in Australia calculate rents based on 25 to 30 per cent of assessable income plus all Rent Assistance. Assessable income includes income from wages, Centrelink benefits, Veterans' Affairs benefits, overseas pensions and maintenance income, but does not include Rent Assistance. This type of rent setting is used by many community housing providers across Australia, and helps the organisations to meet the cost of subsidised housing and remain financially viable.

Community housing providers are responsible for the day-to-day management of their housing stock, including the setting of rents, and are accountable to the relevant state or territory government regarding the use of state and Commonwealth funding provided for community housing.

In some jurisdictions, such as New South Wales, rent setting policies for community housing are aligned with public housing policies. In these cases, community housing providers will continue to exempt the pension increase as long as it is quarantined from public housing rents.

However, the Australian Government knows the challenges that people on the pension can face, especially in relation to housing. This is why we've instigated a significant increase in pensions from September 2009, granted as part of the Secure and Sustainable Pension Reforms. Also, through the Stronger, Fairer, Simpler tax reforms, announced earlier this year, the Government is providing better superannuation concessions for over three million low income earners, helping to deliver substantial improvements in retirement savings.

QUESTION: *Financial literacy and Investment IQ amongst women is an issue of concern specifically within the context of status of women. We at The Women's Investment Club would like to see a greater participation from the private sector to promote competence in money management and investing amongst women.*

How does the Minister view this issue and how can private financial sector players be approached to contribute visibly in this matter.

- Meena Wahi, Director, The Women's Investment Club

RESPONSE:

I am very particularly concerned about women's economic security in this country, so I commend your organisation for promoting women's financial literacy initiatives.

The Government currently funds a number of organisations to create and maintain partnerships with the private financial sector, including initiatives such as financial literacy programs, matched savings schemes and no and low-interest loans.

In relation to contacting financial sector players to become involved, options include:

- Organisations can approach banks directly
- Organisations can approach peak bodies directly
- Organisations can contact FaHCSIA Financial Management Program funded service providers

You might also find these links helpful:

FaHCSIA – Financial Management Program (FMP)

http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/communities/progserv/financial_management_program/Pages/default.aspx#2

Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC)

<http://www.fido.gov.au/fido/fido.nsf/byHeadline/Women%20and%20money#tips>

Australian Financial Counselling and Credit Reform Association (AFCCRA)

<http://www.afccra.org>

I wish you the best of luck with your initiatives. Please keep me updated of your plans as they progress.

QUESTION: *How is the government redressing the disparity between women and men's Superannuation savings, acknowledging that women are often out of the workforce for extended periods of time caring for their children?*

Many of the jobs for women today are part-time and contract which greatly impacts on their ability to obtain finance to purchase their own home (especially now with banks etc tightening up their rules), particularly if they are sole parenting. This further decreases their longer term financial stability. What is the government doing to help support women, particularly sole parents, move towards purchasing their own homes?

- Robyn Bishop

QUESTION: *Women of workforce age who care in the long term for family members with a disabilities are known to have diminished or negligible superannuation, resulting in continued social exclusion and poverty. Could you describe how the government intends to address this issue?*

- Gill Pierce, Program Manager, Policy and Research, Carers Victoria

RESPONSE:

I am very concerned that Australian women do not share the same economic security as men. On average, women earn about 83 cents for every dollar a man earns and their superannuation savings are generally about half those of men. These inequities can have far-reaching consequences with women more likely to be reliant on the age pension and therefore more vulnerable to poverty in their retirement years.

As you indicate in your question and as detailed in the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2009 report *Accumulating Poverty*, the gap in the superannuation savings of women stems in large part from their broken work patterns and the fact that they continue to bear a disproportionate share of the responsibility for unpaid caring and household work. One of the Government's key intentions therefore over the next three years will be to focus on men's engagement in the sharing of unpaid care and to provide families with the support that enables them to make choices around work and life balance.

The Government will also be focusing on measures that build on the initiatives taken in our first term to improve women's economic security, including the Secure and Sustainable Pension Reforms and the Stronger Fairer Simpler tax reforms.

The Government is assisting families and low income earners to access safe, secure and affordable housing through investing almost \$20 million in programs which address housing supply, home purchase affordability and rental affordability.

The \$7,000 First Home Owner Grant (FHOG) is an important measure for eligible home buyers and assists with the costs associated with purchasing a home. As well as helping Australians into a home of their own, the FHOG is

supporting jobs in the residential construction, real estate and related industries.

A complementary initiative is the First Home Saver Accounts (FHSA), offered through participating banks. These accounts help aspiring home buyers save for their first home over a number of years and are a simple, tax effective way for Australians to save a deposit for their first home.

Through the FHSA initiative, the Government provides a 17 per cent contribution on the first \$5,000 (indexed) of savings deposited in an Account by an individual each year. This means that anyone who contributes \$5,000 to their Account receives a \$935 co-contribution from the Government. Interest on the accounts is taxed at 15 per cent, which is a lower rate than is charged on most savings accounts.

The FHOG and FHSA programs are available in addition to various State and Territory initiatives designed to assist Australians purchase their first home. The programs can consist of grants, stamp duty exemption or concessions, shared equity schemes or low income financial assistance. Interested home buyers are encouraged to check their state or territory revenue office website to see what initiatives they may be eligible for.

The Government is investing in increasing the supply of housing and making homes more affordable for Australians, through the Housing Affordability Fund (HAF) and National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS).

The \$512 million HAF program reduces the prices of homes in new developments that are funded under it, by bringing down the cost of infrastructure and in some cases the cost burden of inefficient planning requirements.

The Fund is also supporting employment and helping to reduce the shortage of housing in Australia by bringing forward new housing starts and making projects viable.

Additionally, the \$700 million NRAS is assisting to boost the supply of affordable rental dwellings for low income families, through offering a National Rental Incentive to institutional investors and not-for-profit organisations. Over the next five years, this scheme will increase the number of affordable rental homes by 50,000 and give families the opportunity to access homes rented at 20 per cent below market value.

QUESTION: *Most sex education in school's targets those adolescents who are already sexually active, and/or makes a judgement that they are likely to be. This contradicts that evidence that more than 50% of secondary school graduates have not had sexual intercourse at the time of graduating. What will your ministry do to ensure that young people have access to sex and relationship education which encourages and supports a delay in sexual activity? and How will your ministry ensure that the providers of such education are enabled access to competitive processes of funding?*

- Debbie Garratt RN, Executive Director, Real Choices Australia

QUESTION: *Considering the progress on the development of the Australian Curriculum, what emphasis will be placed on ensuring that:*

- *comprehensive, age appropriate, respectful relationships and sexual health education programs*
 - *delivered by trained and trusted teachers in the class room*
 - *beginning before children and young people become sexually active*
- will be a part of the Health and Physical Education learning area that has been identified as a phase 3 focus?*

- Kaisu Vartto, CEO, Sexual Health information networking and education SA Inc (Shine SA)

RESPONSE:

The delivery of education in Australian schools remains the responsibility of government and non-government education authorities in each state and territory.

However, the Australian Government considers that sex education is an important element in the development of young people's life skills and supports them in making informed choices about personal relationships. Given diverse community views on this subject, the Government considers that sex education should be implemented in consultation with the school community; be respectful of religious and philosophical views; and be age appropriate.

Australian schools generally offer sex education as part of the personal development, health and physical education curriculum. Emphasis is placed on empowering students to make informed and healthy decisions inclusive of broader issues such as personal responsibilities, relationships, friendships, effective communication and decision making.

The draft *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children* released in August 2010 also reiterated the Government's commitment to supporting respectful relationships education for young people and stated that it would work through the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to support the inclusion of respectful relationships education in phase three of the Australian Curriculum.

National Curriculum

The Australian Government has established the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority to oversee the development of a rigorous and world-class national curriculum from kindergarten to Year 12, beginning with the learning areas of English, mathematics, science and history. The national curriculum in these areas has been developed and will be implemented by the states and territories from 2011. A second phase of work will involve the development of a national curriculum in languages, geography and the arts.

All Australian education ministers have agreed to include Health and Physical Education in the third phase of the national curriculum, which will include sex education, along with information and communications technology, design and technology, economics, business and civic and citizenship.

The ACARA website at www.acara.edu.au will report progress of Phase 3 and provide information on consultation opportunities as they arise.

QUESTION: *In 2009 the National Vocational Equity Advisory Council was established to provide high level advice to the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) to guide equity reform in the national training system. WAVE (Women in Adult and Vocational Education) as the peak national women's body re: education and work related training, and other peak women's bodies, are alarmed by the total erasure of anything to do with women, at all, in NVEAC's charter and their recently released draft Equity Blueprint. We are very concerned that this omission will impact negatively on Australian women and girls.*

How will you respond to these concerns, and ensure that outcomes for girls and women are included and made explicit in national VET policy into the future?

- Helaine Costello, SA Co – Convenor Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE)

RESPONSE:

I believe that if we are to continue as a strong and prosperous nation then we must support all Australians, including women, to pursue vocational education and training opportunities and to make the most of their talents.

Ensuring that the benefits of vocational education and training are available to everyone is one of the enduring objectives of the Australian Government in developing the national strategies in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system.

The Australian Government works closely with the states and territories through the Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) to ensure that Australia's current and future workforce needs are met through increased participation, educational attainment, skills development and skills use to achieve greater productivity.

MCTEE, which is the key decision making body in Australia's national training system, regularly monitors achievement progress of Council of Australian Government (COAG) targets to improve outcomes for Australians, including disadvantaged groups, and to make adjustments to policy settings as necessary to meet these targets. In April 2010 MCTEE created a new principal committee focused on pursuing access and participation issues across the tertiary sector.

MCTEE has also established the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC), which considers equity issues affecting all Australians across the VET sector. The NVEAC has been formed to support MCTEE's commitment to identify the reform needed in VET to improve outcomes for disadvantaged learners in the VET system. The new advisory arrangements for equity in the VET sector provide an opportunity to work towards achieving gender equity in VET.

The NVEAC is currently developing an overarching policy statement or 'equity blueprint', which will integrate equity considerations into all aspects of the national training system. The blue print will be considered by MCTEE later this year.

Also, under Australia's national training system, state and territory governments are responsible for managing and delivering all aspects of the public VET training system within their jurisdictions, including TAFE institutions. This agreements aims to provide states and territories with the flexibility to target their total resources, including those provided by the Federal Government, in a way which allows them to identify and implement solutions at a local level to address their areas of greatest need.

QUESTION: *When the Howard government introduced the GST, the Labor Opposition indicated that it particularly disagreed with the tax being imposed on women's sanitary products. Now into the second term of a Labor government, however, we still see the GST being imposed on goods that are *necessities* not luxuries - and not a peep from Health or Status of Women! My analysis of Treasury documents indicates that the loss of revenue would be relatively minimal - and for a gain that would benefit all women of menstrual age, both financially and symbolically. When do you plan to make good on your earlier opposition to this discriminatory tax, and take action to remove it?*

- Michelle Imison, Australian Federation of Graduate Women

RESPONSE:

This is a vexed issue which has been debated for many years – and continues to be discussed.

The GST applies broadly to goods and services, with a limited number of exemptions in areas such as basic food, education and medical services. The GST replaced a number of Commonwealth and state taxes and is set at a single uniform rate of 10 per cent. Having a single rate that applies to most goods and services minimises complexity and reduces compliance costs.

The Government acknowledges that sanitary products are essential for women. However, the Government's policy is not to tax or exempt items on the basis of whether they are essential. The GST operates most efficiently when applied to as broad a range of goods and services as possible. Every additional exemption adds to the complexity of the GST system and increases the compliance costs of taxpayers, which are passed on to consumers.

As revenue from the GST is paid to the States and Territories, additional exemptions would undermine the revenue base of the States and Territories and their ability to provide essential community services, such as health and education. I note that any change to the rate or base of the GST requires the unanimous agreement of the States and Territories.

QUESTION: *I participate in the commercial fishing industry, the industry in NSW is a managed and regulated industry. It has over the past three decades been restructured and restructured and is again undergoing restructure. Employment is affected across all sectors from getting the fish from the water to the final product on the table.*

Marine Parks, area restrictions for recreational fishing and just incidental closures continue to eat into the area available to commercial fishers - many who are second and third generation fishers. The Commercial fishery in NSW is classified as a designated fishery and must have Environmental impact assessments and Management Strategies.

Can you assist this industry to address the concerns that they have with the apparent disregard by community, government and their agencies to provide and respect the necessary connectivity required to maintain a viable commercial fishery so as to ensure employment remains onshore as well for co-operatives, markets and local fish outlets?

Protecting the availability of commercial caught local fish is important to our communities health, economic well being and food security. We have been risking and loosing generations of fishing knowledge and historic sustainable fishing practices due to the systems of management regimes applied.

- *Mary Howard*

RESPONSE:

The Australian Government is concerned about the sustainability of our primary industries and the communities and families that depend on them. When managing our marine environment, the government tries to strike a balance between various users, and between economic, social and environmental outcomes. This isn't an easy issue – and I understand that changes are affecting employees in the industry.

The Australian Government generally manages commercial fisheries beyond three nautical miles off the coast, with state and territory governments generally responsible for fisheries inside three nautical miles. However, there are many exceptions: for example, in New South Wales the state government manages a number of fisheries, such as the Lobster, Ocean Fish Trawl and Ocean Trap and Line Fisheries that extend to 80 nautical miles offshore. Commonwealth fisheries are managed in accordance with the Commonwealth Fisheries Harvest Strategy policy, which aims to maximise the economic yield while helping to ensure biological sustainability.

If we work together to manage fish stocks sustainably we can make sure that we are maintaining employment opportunities in coastal communities, not only today but also for future generations.

QUESTION: *Double standards and the glass ceiling are real, and will be until both men and women respect the role women play in business and in the home. This is a reflection of our society, but rather than waiting for generations for it to change organically, as per the drink driving and smoking in pubs legislation, we have to demand that women are treated respectfully and inclusively in all facets of life through legislated inclusion strategies. I give 3 examples where I believe the Government has an opportunity to legislate, and my question to you is why this could not be implemented, as it is in other parts of the world:*

- 1. 12 months paid maternity/paternity leave paid via Medicare/ Centrelink*
- 2. No gender to exceed 60% of any public or private board*
- 3. Equal representation of men's and women's sport in the media*

Re: 1 Maternity Leave

I was lucky enough to have my son in Norway where I was entitled to 12 months paid maternity leave, even though I was only there on a working-holiday visa. (My leave started 3 weeks before the baby's due date. My son's father was entitled to 2 weeks leave, and it was compulsory for the mother to take the first 6 weeks. After that the mother and father could split the time as they wished eg: some people cared for the child 6 months each). As a so-called 'advanced' nation, the fact that Australia does not have a national maternity/paternity leave program that allows either parent to stay home with their children until the child can walk and talk is unacceptable. Rather than supporting our own families at home, Australia has chosen to spend billions of taxpayer dollars to destroy other families through military action overseas.

Re: 2: Women on Boards

I was involved in setting up the organisation, Women on Boards, to try to address the imbalance of female decision-makers at the board level. In Norway, it is mandatory that no board has more than 60% of either gender

Re: 3: Women's Sport in the Media

In Norway many years ago it was agreed by all media publishers that 1 men's team sport (football – FIFA) and 1 women's sport (handball – IHF) would be given equal treatment in the media. Consequently, the Norwegian women's handball team is fully professional, and is a gold medal winning Olympic and World Championship team.

I do not believe this will change organically, but must be legislated to change. Why can't the Government introduce legislation to address these examples of injustice?

- Catherine Ordway, Sport & Anti-Doping Consultant

RESPONSE:

With regard to your first question about maternity leave, legislation was enacted on 14 July 2010 to introduce Australia's first Paid Parental Leave scheme. The scheme is fair, balanced and affordable.

It will provide Parental Leave Pay for 18 weeks at the rate of the National Minimum Wage to working mothers and other primary carers whose child is born or adopted on or after 1 January 2011. All or part of the payment can be transferred to the father or other parent where they take on primary care.

The Government has also committed to providing eligible working fathers or partners with two weeks Paid Paternity Leave from 1 July 2012.

These reforms will encourage parents to take time off work after the birth of a child, and help embed parental leave as a normal aspect of work and family life.

More detailed information can be found at the Family Assistance Office website (www.familyassist.gov.au).

With regard to your question about women on boards: the underrepresentation of women on boards in Australia is an issue that has been of considerable concern to me for some time and one that I am keen to address in my role as the new Minister for the Status of Women.

As you may be aware the recently released 2010 Census on Women in Leadership from the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, showed that just 8.4 per cent of board directorships in Australia's top 200 companies were held by women. It also showed that, compared with New Zealand, the UK, Canada, the US and South Africa, Australia has the lowest percentages of women in our most senior corporate positions.

The figures paint a very dismal picture and indeed one that does not do justice to the wealth of talent and ability of Australian women and their capacity to be outstanding contributors to our country's boards. The Australian Government is therefore determined to see positive change in this regard.

In recognition of this determination, the Government made an election commitment to ensure that by 2015 all government boards would have a minimum of 40 per cent representation of women and 40 per cent representation of men. It has also entered a partnership with the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD), to provide 70 scholarships for board-ready women to complete key courses in Board Directorship.

These commitments come on top of a number of existing initiatives, including the annual Women on Australian Government Boards report and targets across most state and territory governments.

In relation to your question on the introduction of legislation, I note that opinions on what is achievable under mandatory measures are widely varied. While I understand your concerns, the Government is encouraged by recent

private sector initiatives, including the Business Council of Australia's 'C Suite' project, the AICD's 'ASX200 Chairmen's Mentoring Program and the new ASX corporate governance guidelines requiring companies report against the proportion of women on staff in senior ranks and on boards.

In view of these initiatives and the increasing awareness among business leaders of the need for change in this area as well as our own gender target on Government boards commitment, the Government will not be pushing for legislative change at this time. It will, however, be watching developments with interest to ensure that the sorts of statistics that came from the latest EOWA Census in Leadership report are consigned to the past.

With regard to your question about women's sport in the media, the Australian Government sees the promotion of women in sport as a key focus for the future development of sport in Australia.

The Australian Government's direction paper *Australian Sport: the Pathway to Success* has identified new initiatives that the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) will lead, including:

- providing additional funding and resources to improve the media coverage of Australian women's sport
- staging Women in Sport Awards to recognise exemplary initiatives which provide special support for women's and girls' participation in sport as players, coaches, administrators or officials.

In 2008-09 the ASC commissioned research, *Towards a Level Playing Field: sport and gender in Australian media*, which confirmed female sport and male sport receive starkly disproportionate amounts of coverage on Australian television, despite ongoing successes and strong participation levels of women in sport.

The report assessed the quantity of media coverage and the representation of women and sport in that coverage and provides the ASC with empirical data about the media coverage of female athletes that can be used to benchmark future research in this area.

The ASC conducted a workshop in July 2010 to consider issues arising from *Towards a Level Playing Field: sport and gender in Australian media*. Key outcomes included:

- brokering relationships with the media for the Australian sport system
- implementing key performance indicators on media coverage in sport within Funding Service Level Agreements with sporting organisations
- establishing training and mentoring for sporting organisations' Media Managers
- establishing a database of media outlets for sport
- improving the business case for women's sport
- recognising journalists who provide significant women's media coverage.

The ASC is exploring these outcomes further with a view to implementation in the near future, following consultation with an advisory committee consisting of key sport and media stakeholders.

As previous Minister for Sport, I greatly enjoyed promoting the achievements of our Australian athletes – both male and female – and celebrating their wins in many fields. I encourage media to examine the content, tone and extent of their coverage of women's sport.

QUESTION: *Australian women are not truly equal before after under in or at law.*

It is grim indeed that statistically the place where our women and children are most at risk of men's sexual and diverse forms of violence is in their own home and amongst their family and friends. What will you do about this?

- *Reclaim the Night Australia*

QUESTION: *It is really encouraging if the Government wishes to advance its agenda to stop violence against women. Have you read the recommendations from the National Council of Women and also Amnesty International's submission to the process which calls for substantial and strategic increases that are sustained to reduce the appalling level of domestic violence and sexual assault that exists within Australia? How will the government advance the agenda?*

- *Annie Costin*

QUESTION: *When do you plan to implement the recommendations set out in Time for Action: A National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women? Will significant funding be provided to support implementation over its ten year lifespan? Do you plan to be a strong, feminist voice who speaks out on issues affecting women, including:*

- *the sexual objectification of women in media and advertising*
- *the prevalence of violence against women in Australia*
- *the pervasiveness of violence supportive attitudes and behaviours?*

Women's Health Victoria

QUESTION: *When will Federal Labor's National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children be finalised and implemented?*

While the proposed National Plan released in August is a promising blueprint to address some forms of violence against women (eg. sexual harassment; trafficking; forced prostitution; and traditional practices, such female genital mutilation)?

And will the government also commit to ongoing and sustainable funding to the national plan on its release?

- *Hannah Horborrow, Campaign Coordinator, Amnesty International Australia*

RESPONSE:

I know that women across Australia are looking forward to delivery of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children.

I can assure you that the Australian Government is committed to implementing the Plan with states and territories once it is endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments. We expect this to occur in the coming months.

In August 2010 the Australian Government committed to fund the *National Plan* with \$44.5 million over four years. This builds on the \$42 million investment announced in April 2009 targeting primary prevention activities as well as a new national telephone and online counselling service.. The strategic 12-year vision of the *National Plan* will achieve the attitudinal and behavioural change necessary for stopping violence against women in the future.

The Government has committed to deliver the *National Plan* over the next 12 years through four three-year Action Plans. These plans will support Australian governments to work together to develop, implement and report progress on key actions at the national and local level, within a coordinated national framework.

The Australian Government has made significant funding commitments to programs and payments which support women who are victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. This includes an additional \$730 million invested over the past three years in areas such as homelessness, Indigenous programs, legal aid, family support and prevention programs.

While the *National Plan* has a distinct focus on domestic and sexual violence, the Government is working in other areas to address other forms of violence. The Commonwealth Government provides support to victims of people trafficking through the *Support for Victims of People Trafficking Program*, an important component of the Australian Government's Anti-People Trafficking Strategy. This Program is managed by the Office for Women.

Whilst the *National Plan* does not specifically address sexual objectification of women in media, the Australian Government has committed to establish a Code of Conduct which encourages the media industry to ensure reporting of domestic violence and sexual assault does not trivialise incidents and that victims are portrayed with respect in a non-judgemental manner. I am looking forward to working with the media and women's sector to develop this Code.

As Minister for the Status of Women, I am always concerned to hear about instances of women being portrayed in negative ways. The Australian Government is committed to breaking down gender stereotyping and promoting a new discussion on gender equality that is well-focused, contemporary, and relevant to the Australian people.

You may be interested to know that the Advertising Standards Bureau has recently commissioned research on the community's view of portrayals of women in advertising. The *Community perceptions of sex, sexuality and nudity in advertising* research sends an important message to advertising producers about the community's intolerance of the harmful and negative

impact of sexualised advertising images on both children and women. It is good to see that this research is now available to the public and to producers of advertising. The report may be viewed at

<http://www.adstandards.com.au/publications/factsandfigures>

You can make complaints about particular instances of negative portrayals of women on television and radio directly to television and radio stations, especially if they have breached a code of practice. Information about codes of practice and how to make a complaint can be found at

http://www.acma.gov.au/WEB/STANDARD..PC/pc=CONTACT_COMPLAINTS_OVERVIEW.

QUESTION: *Can you please advise how, as Minister for the Status of Women and with key responsibility for coordinating your Government's elimination of violence against women strategy you will:*

- *Work with the Federal Attorney General's office to ensure that recommendations in the Final Report of the 2010 inquiry are addressed in a timely manner and during the life of this Parliament?*
- *Work with the AG to consider findings of other Family Law reviews and public inquiries.*

- Libby Eltringham, Community Legal Worker

RESPONSE:

Given the intersection of our portfolios, particular in relation to domestic and family violence, I will continue to work closely with the Attorney-General to consider findings of the ALRC Review and other Family Law reviews and public inquiries.

QUESTION: *Why do we have such a perceived contradiction in terms naming up the demonstrated behaviour of significant number of men involved in domestic and family violence as violent and totally unacceptable and not what the community is prepared to tolerate and yet we still allow him in most cases to have access to children which then suffer serious ongoing traumatic experiences by their contact with a “good father”?*

- Annie Wragg, Coordinator Armidale Domestic Violence Intervention Project Inc

RESPONSE:

Ensuring the safety of all Australians and reducing violence against women and their children is a key priority for this Government. That is why we are working with state and territory governments to develop a *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children*. The plan will have a substantial, long-term effect on the rates of violence against women and their children.

The Government is also providing \$17 million for a behaviour-change campaign aimed at preventing young people from ever using or accepting violence in their intimate relationships. The Government has already invested \$42 million to take immediate action to reduce violence against women and children by developing a new national domestic violence and sexual assault telephone and online crisis service.

The Government's priority is to ensure the principle of promoting the best interests of the child is the major consideration of any legislation or policy relating to family law matters. The Government is undertaking work to improve the legal response to domestic and family violence, and to promote responses from criminal justice agencies. The Government is considering the following reports:

- *Evaluation of the 2006 Family Law Reforms*, by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), which looks at the impact of the 2006 changes to the family law system
- *Family Courts Violence Review*, conducted by Professor Richard Chisholm AM, reviews the legislation, processes and procedures that apply in the federal family law courts in the context of family violence
- *Improving Responses to Family Violence in the Family Law System*, conducted by the Family Law Council.

The Government has also asked the Australian Law Reform Commission to work with state and territory law reform commissions to examine the inter-relationship of laws that relate to the safety of women and their children. The findings and recommendations of these reports, as well as associated research, are being considered to inform any legislative and policy development in this area.

QUESTION: *Will you consider adopting a gender equity approach to legislation and policy to ensure the impact on women is taken into account? This would require tools such as a gender responsiveness framework, like the Victorian DHS Gender and Diversity Lens, and legislating gender equity requirements. For example, in the UK in 2007, the Sex Discrimination Act was amended to introduce a gender equality scheme which included a statutory duty on public authorities to 'promote equality' (see http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_066068).*

- *Women's Health Victoria*

RESPONSE:

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

To provide further support to Australian 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.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in concert with the Office for Women and state and territory governments, is developing a set of National Gender Indicators. These Indicators will measure progress towards equality and identify gaps in economic security, paid work, family life, safety and justice, and health and wellbeing.

QUESTION: *What will be your priorities in the status of women part of your portfolio? How will you allocate your time between the three responsibilities?*

How will this area be affected by your other responsibilities i.e. child care and employment participation?

- Eva Cox

RESPONSE:

As Minister for the Status of Women I will continue the focus on the government priorities to reduce violence against women and children, improve women's economic security and ensure women's equal place in society. Within the next year, I expect to have launched the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women, announce reforms to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency and Act, and release a draft of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security in furtherance of our obligations under UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

I consider there are excellent opportunities for reform in the confluence of my portfolios. Access to affordable child care is one key factor to increasing the employment prospects for women. Improving women's employment participation is integral to improving women's economic security.

I'm looking forward to working across all three portfolios to secure better outcomes for women across the country.

QUESTION: *Is it time, not only to restore the Office for the Status of Women to PM and Cabinet, but also to replace it with an 'Office of Gender Equity'?*

While many will argue that this would bring the privileged gender into the only bureaucratic space which focuses on women's disadvantage, this is my reasoning for this proposition:

1) the Office should be staffed with women and men who are TRAINED in gender equity issues: either at university or on the job, ideally both (there has been a move away from appointing 'femocrats' to the offices of women in recent years, i.e. trained feminists in positions of power).

2) The relations between women and men reproduce inequality in Australian society. Men must take on more childcare if women are to take on more boardroom positions. Masculinity and femininity are understood as different to each other, rather than as largely overlapping categories. An office of gender equity would focus on those relations and improving them.

3) After a decade of a conservative government, bolstered by a conservative press, many Australians now see feminists as 'whingeing victims' who do not realise how lucky they are. By contrast, there is continued sympathy for men's disadvantage (e.g. as claimed in custody cases) and boys' disadvantage (e.g. as claimed in schooling). A gender equity office would explore WHICH men and WHICH women are disadvantaged (as well as which ones are advantaged) and why, and seek to redress the causes of disadvantage for both genders, including those that intersect also with socio-economic status, ethnicity and so on.

4) Related to the above, the intersections of gender, race, class are complex and make it difficult to discern why women as a group still have less power, resources and prestige than men as a group. A gender equity office would develop policies which respond to the less visible structures of inequality in society today, now that there is almost no legislative discrimination against women.

- Chilla Bulbeck, Professor Emerita (previously Professor of Women's Studies), University of Adelaide

QUESTION: *The current Office for Women is part of FaHCSIA, it was moved during the Howard years from the Department of PM and Cabinet much to the dismay of women's groups because a) it sent out a very strong message about what policy makers at that time saw as the role of women and b) the move to a line department meant that the potential influence of OFW was diminished in terms of being consulted on cabinet and budget issues. If OFW is to fulfil its role of "influencing policy, Cabinet and Budget decision-making to ensure women's interests are considered", it MUST be moved back to the Department of PM and Cabinet. To what extent is there a commitment to shift OFW back to Department of PM and Cabinet. If such a move is not being considered, what steps will the government (and the opposition) take to ensure that a gendered approach informs decisions made by policy makers?*

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

RESPONSE:

The decision for the portfolio location of Office for Women is a matter for Cabinet. Whilst the location of the Office has changed over time, I can assure you that this Government has maintained its focus on equality for women and men in Australia and continues to progress this work across government.

The Office for Women's role as a policy coordination unit is to help work across government operate consistently to remove barriers to equality and ensure legislation, policies, and programs take account of differential effects for women and men. The Office for Women provides advice on the gender dimensions of submissions to Cabinet so that equality is considered in the early stages of policy development.

I agree that one of the most important ways to improve women's economic security is to ensure that men and women can share caring responsibilities and have options to balance those responsibilities with their working life.

We have already introduced changes to the Sex Discrimination Act to make sure that both men and women are not discriminated against in seeking flexible work arrangements.

The Australian Government is also pursuing a number of research projects on men's sharing of domestic work and care of children to provide a solid evidence base for future reforms:

- a research report by Urbis Pty Ltd on national and international government policy initiatives that facilitate men to engage in caring and unpaid domestic work research.
- a project managed with FaHCSIA's Research and Analysis Branch and undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) to identify the impact that fathers' level of involvement in shared care and unpaid domestic work has on family functioning and outcomes for children, using existing large data sources.
- a survey of families by the Social Research Centre and The University of Queensland to study the characteristics of and aspirations behind men's engagement in the sharing of care and unpaid domestic work.

QUESTION: *Will the government recognise Counselling as a profession to enable women with children in our country to have access to a counsellor of their own choice and one that specialises in the specific area of counselling the woman or their child is needing? eg marriage counsellor, pregnancy counsellor, careers counsellor, abuse counsellor, family counsellor, children's counsellor etc.....*

This would also help prevent many women and children from developing early signs of mental illness like depression or anxiety issues. These symptoms can occur especially after a family breakdown or if there are any domestic violence issues.

Many single female parents struggle with parenting issues, and they cannot simply afford to pay a professional counsellor to do children's behaviour modification programs, because the mother is usually on a pension or she is not earning enough money to afford any extra out of pocket expenses. In most cases the mother may not even receive maintenance money from the father. This means she is on a very tight budget.

So many women feel stuck and overwhelmed in these situations where there is no job, no support networks. Full-time parenting for a woman on her own with children can cause the woman's world to fall apart in some cases, especially if the woman has no family of her own or friends to offer her any support. Women can feel very isolated and they can get depressed.

If Counselling was rebateable for women with children, this would fill in this gap, and possibly enable women to focus more on positive parenting and encouraging women to return back to the workforce when it was possible to do so.

Many women today are forced to go to their GP and are prescribed anti-depressant drugs to help them cope with these everyday issues that they cannot talk to anybody about.

Being a mother and parenting can be very challenging and some mothers get depressed because they simply cannot cope with all the demands, especially if there has been a family breakdown or any domestic violence issues.

Women who are parents have extra stress in their lives as parenting is not an easy task. This is why the government needs to provide every woman with access to a counsellor of the woman's choice, rather than somebody making that choice for her.

It's the women and children suffering, and counselling can help make that bridge from the impossible to the possible. The Government needs to carefully consider that the children in these households hold the key to Australia's future.

- Dianne Zebic, Professional Counsellor

RESPONSE:

I agree that it is important principle that everyone in the community should have access to the support that they need to be the best parents they can be.

The Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (Better Access) initiative is available to people with an assessed mental disorder, including psychological strategies provided by appropriately qualified mental health professionals. However, counsellors are not included under the Better Access initiative.

At the moment, counsellors are not included as eligible providers for this scheme.

I understand that in order for psychotherapists and counsellors to be considered for future inclusion in the clinical services funded through the Better Access initiative there needs to be a uniform national credentialing system in place to identify those individuals with appropriate skills and experience in the provision of the specific psychological strategies covered by the initiative. The level of knowledge, skills and experience would need to be equivalent to those mental health professionals currently eligible to provide services under the Better Access initiative.

I understand that the Australian Counselling Association and the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia have been advised that this is an option for them to pursue.

QUESTION: *One third of our population lives in regional, rural or remote Australia. In the past, we have seen a metropolitan mindset dominate our political decision making, and hence we have many worthwhile initiatives which have not worked to their best capacity for rural, regional and remote Australians.*

As Minister, are you willing to undertake a rural proofing process with policies or programs your office may implement?

Is your office prepared to check that impact that all policies and programs might have on rural communities, prior to endorsement at a political level?

- Karen Tully, National Rural Women's Coalition and Network

RESPONSE:

The Australian Government recognises the unique needs and significant contribution to the nation by regional, rural and remote areas of Australia. Around two thirds of Australia's export earnings come from regional industries such as agriculture, tourism, retail, services and manufacturing. Australia's regions are also integral to our values and sense of identity, which come from our unique and diverse culture, landscape, history and people.

Since 1998, Ministers have prepared Regional Impact Statements for new policies and programs to describe their potential impact on regional Australia.

The Government recently created the Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government to develop ongoing partnerships with regional Australia and local government, to ensure regions are given a strong voice to allow them to inform government decision-making.

The Government is delighted to fund your organisation, the National Rural Women's Coalition and Network, to improve the representation of women from rural and regional areas to government. I look forward to working with you and the other Women's Alliances on some exciting new initiatives over the next few years.

QUESTION: *What is the state or Commonwealth government doing to ensure affordable child care for Aboriginal children to assist them in their school years?*

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

- Millie Ingram

RESPONSE:

The Government recognises the valuable role that Outside Schools Hours Care services provide to Australian parents and their children, including Indigenous Children.

That's why we provide both Set Up Assistance and Sustainability Assistance to all OSHC services in their first year of operation. Small not-for-profit OSHC services outside metropolitan areas may receive Sustainability Assistance to help with their viability after their initial year of operation, such as those in remote Indigenous communities.

Approved OSHC services can also administer Child Care Benefit on behalf of parents. Through the Child Care Benefit, we are helping families most in need of financial assistance through means-testing. In addition to this, the Child Care Rebate covers half of working families' out-of-pocket costs for approved child care, up to a maximum of \$7500 per child per year.

In addition to these measures, the Australian Government also provides Budget Based funding to help support non-mainstream child care services to provide access to child care in communities where mainstream or conventional child care services are not available or viable. Over 250 Indigenous child care services are supported across Australia, primarily in regional and remote locations, to ensure access to low or no cost care for Indigenous children. Of these, around 120 provide after and before school and vacation care services.

QUESTION: *The proposed national reforms to early childhood education and care are viewed by many as a very positive step towards continually improving the quality of early childhood education and care for young children.*

In particular the Early Years Learning Framework which was endorsed by COAG in July 2009 provides educators and parents with very useful and consistent information about the design and delivery of quality early childhood education programs.

An undertaking was given to release the supporting Educators Guide in October 2009, can you provide an update on the progress towards releasing the Guide?

- Anne Livingstone, Global Community Resourcing Pty Ltd

RESPONSE:

Thank you for your commitment to this important program.

The current version of the Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework will be released shortly, to allow services to provide final comment on how it works. The guide will be distributed to services, and will also be available online at the following address:

deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Pages/EarlyYearsLearningFramework.aspx

QUESTION: *My question is about childcare and is a huge concern to many carers in this industry:*

Regarding 3-5 year old ratio in child care :

I am aware of the ratio changes in this age group being implemented in 2016 (6 years away ...) but my concern is that the staff in the 3-5 year old room are always alone with any amount of children regardless of ratio. I feel that this is a huge responsibility and is causing a lot of stress.

Eg. if there is a serious incidence in the room concerning a child or staff member, you have no second witness to what happened. If a staff member is falsely accused of something eg. smacking a child - this can lead to unfair dismissal, court case etc.

These are just a couple of examples of what could happen. All other age groups have 2 or more staff members in the room.

- Pia Pedersen

RESPONSE:

I appreciate your concerns about the responsibility placed on educators working directly with children, particularly when they are on their own with a group of children.

Under the current regulatory arrangements, licensing of long day care centres is the responsibility of state and territory governments. Long day care centres are able to arrange their rooms according to the needs of the children, the limitations or opportunities of the building and their preferred staffing arrangements, as long as the staff-to-child ratios and physical space requirements are met. Some state and territory governments also currently regulate for group size which can influence how rooms are arranged.

The decision on how many 3-5 year olds will be in a room and how many educators will be working with them will be determined by the number of children enrolled and how the centre prefers to arrange their rooms to manage issues such as noise, the flow of passageways, the relationships between the children and the learning spaces set up for children.

Under the new National Quality System, which will be introduced on 1 January 2012, the educator-to-child ratio will be 1:11 for the 3-5 year age group. There will be no specification for group size and long day care centres and preschools will continue to be able to arrange their rooms to meet the needs of the children enrolled, their preferred staffing arrangements and their specific building requirements.

In the case where there is more than one staff member in a centre, centres have the option where educators are working with children alone in a room to place windows and glass doors so that there is visual access to the room. In this way, educators working with children can be viewed by other staff in the centre which encourages transparency and accountability as well as supporting educators in their work with children.

Child Care 4

QUESTION: *Is the Federal government prepared to commit to affordable and accessible child care arrangements, including funding on-site care in public sector workplaces, which would include making funding available to State and Territory governments?*

- Lisa Fitzpatrick, State Secretary, Australian Nursing Federation (Victorian Branch)

RESPONSE: The Australian Government is absolutely committed to ensuring Australian families with access to high-quality, affordable early childhood education and child care.

Overall, the Government is providing more than \$18.2 billion over four years for early childhood education and child care funding. This includes \$14.9 billion to directly help around 800 000 Australian families each year with the cost of child care through the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate.

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- We raised the Child Care Rebate to 50% of parents' out-of-pocket expenses, and increased the maximum for each child in care to \$7,500 a year. Under the former Coalition Government, the Rebate was only 30% and the maximum only \$4354. In 2004, the out of pockets, after subsidies, for a family with one child in long day care and earning \$55,000 a year were 13 per cent of their disposable income. In 2010, this proportion had declined to 7 per cent.

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- The Government also promised to pay the Child Care Rebate quarterly and we have delivered on this commitment. And from 1 July 2011 we will pay the Child Care Rebate fortnightly – so families get the assistance they need when they need it.
- Importantly, we also fund an unlimited amount of child care places, which assist new services to set up and existing services to expand.

However, the decision to provide on-site child care for employees is an individual business decision for each employer. Some employers do this through the purchase of places in an existing child care service.

Employers can also allow employees to salary sacrifice the cost of their child care. Employer sponsored child care may be exempt from Fringe Benefits Tax where the child care is provided on the business premises of the employer. This exemption is in place to encourage employers to address the child care needs of their staff. Further information can be obtained from the Australian Taxation Office on 13 28 66.

Child Care 5

QUESTION: *I own a manufacturing business with my partner. I work, am studying for a degree and we also have 3 small children. My question is when will there be support for women in business to assist with childcare costs (I have 2 in childcare), to assist with women in business who want to further their education and opportunities by studying. I do not have access to affordable childcare and have the added expense of supporting my study expenses.*

- Melissa Fitzgerald

RESPONSE:

The Government recognises how important access to high quality, affordable childcare is for women's participation in the workforce.

Overall, we investing over \$14.9 billion over the next four years to help over 800,000 Australian families each year with the cost of child care through the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate.

The Government provides assistance with the cost of child care to families studying through Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate.

Child Care Benefit is an income-tested payment targeted to people most in need of additional financial assistance.

Child Care Rebate is not income tested and provides additional assistance for families using approved child care for work, training, or study related commitments. It covers half of all out-of-pocket child care costs up to a maximum amount of \$7500 per child per year. Families must be eligible for non income requirements of Child Care Benefit to qualify.

To check your eligibility for the Child Care Benefit or Child Care Rebate, I recommend you visit:

www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Resources/Pages/CCfactsheetkit.aspx or www.mychild.gov.au.

Child Care 6

QUESTION: *Will you be reviewing the suggestion that pre-school centres are located on the site of primary schools and reconsidering funding for such centres?*

- Jane Baker, President, Australian Federation of Graduate Women

RESPONSE: The Australian Government has committed to Universal Access (http://www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood/policy_agenda/ecua/pages/home.aspx) to ensure that all children have access to a preschool program delivered by a four year university qualified early childhood teacher, in accordance with a national early years learning framework, for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year. This commitment is being implemented in partnership with state and territory governments. The Commonwealth's major contribution is funding of \$955 million over five years, to support the states' and territories' implementation of the commitment. Under these arrangements, the state and territory governments remain responsible for ensuring the provision of preschool. The Australian Government does not generally determine where preschool services are located, nor how they are funded.

In terms of collocation with schools, in five jurisdictions (the ACT, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory) preschool is currently predominantly delivered through a school based system, with most preschool services located on school grounds. In the remaining states of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria provision is mostly through community preschools or integrated with child care services, with school-based provision in a limited number of locations.

Child Care 7

QUESTION: *How will you contain the costs of child care without any controls over the fees that centres can charge?*

- Eva Cox

RESPONSE:

The Australian Government recognises the importance of accessible, affordable and high quality care to Australian women and their families. That's why we are investing \$18.2 billion over four years for early childhood education and child care. This includes \$14.9 billion to directly help around 800 000 Australian families each year with the cost of child care through the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate.

We raised the Child Care Rebate to 50% of parents' out-of-pocket expenses, and increased the maximum for each child in care to \$7,500 a year. Under the former Coalition Government, the Rebate was only 30% and the maximum only \$4354. In 2004, the out of pockets, after subsidies, for a family with one child in long day care and earning \$55,000 a year were 13 per cent of their disposable income. In 2010, this proportion had declined to 7 per cent.

The Government also promised to pay the Child Care Rebate quarterly and we have delivered on this commitment. And from 1 July 2011 we will pay the Child Care Rebate fortnightly – so families get the assistance they need when they need it.