



**JULIE COLLINS MP**

**MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES  
MINISTER FOR INDIGENOUS EMPLOYMENT  
AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
MINISTER FOR THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

**SPEECH**

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– INTERNATIONAL WOMEN’S DAY ACTIVITIES 2012**

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Good afternoon.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners on whose land we meet today and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

A warm welcome also to the Opposition Shadow Parliamentary Secretary, Senator Michaelia Cash, and my Parliamentary colleagues Gai Brodtmann and Andrew Leigh.

To Julie (McKay) and to all of UN Women Australia, thank you for hosting this event and for your dedication to advancing the status of women in Australia.

We have been asked today to talk about economic empowerment for women and what it means to us.

For the great majority of the world's women, it still means the basics - what most of us in Australia take for granted ... having a roof over our heads, food, clean water, health care, education and clothing.

In these circumstances, necessity prevails over choice.

We have made progress in some areas overseas, for example our funding of a Women's Centre in Vanuatu to address violence against women, helping Indonesia build more than 2,000 junior secondary schools and providing \$500 million for

the construction another 2,000 and boosting the number of women village court magistrates in Papua New Guinea.

The Gillard Government's continuing commitment to the economic empowerment of women is further demonstrated through our appointment of Penny Williams as Australia's first Global Ambassador for Women and Girls last September.

### **Progress in Australia**

Here in Australia, I believe economic empowerment means being free to make life choices - such as when or if to have a family, the type of education you want, the career you want to pursue and when you want to retire.

And we have made progress - over the past 50 years, women's workforce participation has risen from 34 per cent to around 60 per cent.

There are 5.2 million women in jobs today, comprising around 46 per cent of the workforce.

But we're still not paid equal wages and we're still underrepresented in business and politics.

The latest ABS data released last week reported one of the highest gender wage gaps in Australia in three decades at almost 18 per cent.

Women need more support to join, re-join or stay in the workforce.

### **Leadership does matter**

I am the first woman member for the Federal seat of Franklin in Tasmania. My State has its first female Premier. Nationally, we have our first female Prime Minister and our first female Governor-General.

Does this make any difference? Symbolically, it can make a difference because it shows young boys and girls their gender is not an impediment to community leadership and to being able to make a change.

But practical and effective leadership matters more – as a Government we have moved to make important changes that will result in improved economic empowerment of women.

### **Creating flexible workplaces**

Last week, I introduced into the Parliament new laws on gender equality in the workplace that will benefit all women.

Improving women's workforce participation is fundamental to closing the gender gap in the workplace and an absolute must if we are to boost Australia's productive capacity.

That's also why we've introduced Australia's first national paid parental leave scheme.

It's why we've increased the rebate for out-of-pocket expenses for child care from 30 per cent to 50 per cent. This is having a big impact in the take home wages of women returning to work.

In 2004, the out-of-pocket costs for a family with one child in long day care and earning \$55,000 a year were 13.2 per cent of their disposable income – in 2011 this proportion had declined to 7.5 per cent.

The Gillard Government's changes to the Fair Work Act and the recent Fair Work decision on community sector wages will ensure that 150,000 workers in the community sector will get a pay rise.

But there is still much more to do. A woman who experiences violence and discrimination – as too many Australian women and girls do every day – can't be said to be free to make positive choices.

The Gillard Government last year launched Australia's \$86 million National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children.

## **Personal Reflections**

I have also been asked to comment on how my gender has defined me and to describe my own battles.

I'm not sure my gender has defined me, but certainly people's reaction to my gender has helped define me. I have been working for almost 26 years – for 18 of these I have been a parent and the primary carer for my children.

The difference that having flexible work conditions and understanding bosses has made is incalculable. I have been very fortunate to receive this support.

But there have been times when I've also experienced what I believe many parents experience – discrimination for being unable to work extra hours or for being unable to travel because of your caring responsibilities.

There are also those promotions you don't get because you have young children or because you can only work part-time and the role is full-time.

Thankfully we have come a long way since the birth of my first child. There was no government child care rebate, paid parental leave scheme or baby bonus then.

By the birth of my third child, I did receive some paid leave.

This meant I was able to stay at home for nine months rather than the few weeks I did with my second child.

After this time, I remember clearly working out whether it was worth going back to work as my childcare fees were around \$30,000 a year – no rebate then.

## **Conclusion**

Much has changed. Australia is at the forefront of global efforts to achieve gender empowerment.

There is a groundswell of support – particularly in businesses and in industries that perform well, as they come to realise the benefits gender equality confers.

The Gillard Government is redressing the economic imbalances women have inherited over centuries, by combining good economic policy with innovative social policy.

We look forward to continuing to work with employers, unions and Non-Government Organisations – including UN Women – to achieve our common goals.

Thank you.

**ENDS**