

Gender Budget Analysis

Australia's commitment to gender equality

Hon. Julie Bishop, MP, in Canberra.

Australia was one of the more enlightened nations when at federation in 1901 it granted women the right to vote and to stand for elections, a Minister writes. Today its enduring commitment to the pursuit of gender equality through governance continues with its work with Commonwealth and United Nations bodies to improve the status of women at home and internationally.

Ms Bishop is Australia's Minister for Education, Science and Training and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women's Issues.

In Australia the pursuit of gender equality is embedded within all government policies and decision-making processes, which attends to the needs of all groups in society. The Australian government has maintained a focus on women through the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women's Issues.

I was appointed to this position on 27 January and my role is to act as a spokesperson for women in both Parliament and the public arena. The Australian government, as a matter of course, expects all government portfolios to incorporate the perspective of gender equality in policy development and programme delivery. As a member of the cabinet and supported by the Office for Women, I am able to monitor that this expectation is being met.

This is an exciting yet demanding role because the concerns of Australian women cut across just about every area



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of national government decision and policymaking. The government believes in greater choice and opportunity for women. Australia should have a society where women are free to choose the employment, financial and family arrangements that best suit them and, where the government can offer financial and programme support to enable women to successfully make those choices.

Equality of opportunity and choice

Today, in Australia's policy making environment, we want to ensure that men and women have equality of choice and opportunity. While men and women are different, we want to ensure that these differences do not prevent either from achieving. Just as we want to see more women in politics, fathers should also be able to take on the main parenting role if they choose to do so. Both at the ministerial level and at the bureaucracy level there is an important role to play in working with other government Ministers and their departments to foster an approach to achieving gender equity and to maintain momentum over time. The Australian government has developed many tools to make this happen over its history.

Australia is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which holds member states responsible for implementing and reporting on activities to achieve equal opportunity in all aspects of life. Earlier this year Australia appeared before the CEDAW committee to discuss our combined fourth and fifth periodic

report.

CEDAW's definition of equality is outlined in the Office for the High Commission of Human Rights Fact Sheet No.22, *Discrimination against Women: The Convention and the Committee* as:

The concept of equality means much more than treating all persons in the same way. Equal treatment of persons in unequal situations will operate to perpetuate rather than eradicate injustice. True equality can only emerge from efforts directed towards addressing and correcting these situational imbalances. It is this broader view of equality that has become the underlying principle and the final goal in the struggle for recognition and acceptance of the human rights of women.

Australia was the first country to produce an equal opportunity budget analysis and the experience has been formative in this country's modern budgeting approach. Since then more than 40 countries, including Korea, the Philippines and Mexico, have used some form of gender-responsive budgets as a tool in CEDAW compliance.

A budget directs the way a country or state uses its resources and therefore affects the wealth, social relations, access to services and labour participation of its people. Equality in budgeting acknowledges that initiatives created specifically to support women and girls are only part of the overall effect that policies and programmes have on women. Budget initiatives, which make up the bulk of policy and programmes, affect everyone in the population and it is important to ensure that outcomes and opportunities are equally available to women and men, girls and boys.

The Australian government budget analysis work has resulted in important recent policy changes. One example is the commitment to eliminating domestic violence and sexual assault. In 2005 the government released a report that detailed the full costs of domestic violence. The report found that domestic violence is the single biggest health risk factor and most prominent cause of early death or disability for women aged between 15 and 44. The total annual cost of domestic violence in 2002-03 was

estimated at A\$8.1 billion.

Supported by this research, the government has made A\$75.7 million over four years available to the Women's Safety Agenda, which delivers on its election commitment to continue to take a lead role in eliminating domestic violence and sexual assault in the community. The Women's Safety Agenda builds on the successful Partnerships Against Domestic Violence programme, which was a comprehensive campaign to provide immediate practical support for women experiencing domestic violence or sexual assault and to heighten the awareness of this serious issue nationwide.

History of equality in budgeting

Australia pioneered the implementation of women's advisors and offices and gender-responsive budgeting. In 1973, the country's first women's advisor was appointed to represent women's issues within the government process. In 1974 a Women's Affairs Section was established in the Department of the Prime Minister and cabinet. By 1975 there were moves to integrate the section within the public service bureaucracy. The central hub structure headed by a women's affairs office, given the title of Office of the Status of Women, also had 12 women's policy units in other departments. The women's offices would focus on analysing and commenting on policy. This model was a strong Australian contribution to international models of governance of women's affairs.

In 1984, Australia implemented equity analysis in budgeting at the federal government level. The Office of the Status of Women (renamed from the Office of Women's Affairs in 1982) spearheaded the implementation of the Women's Budget strategy. Thirteen departments were required to measure their impact on women in documents to be released on budget night. Following this trial, in 1985 all departments and agencies were required to release sex-specific data and outline how their initiatives impacted upon the status of women.

The Australian Women's Budget statements were initially more than 200 pages long that included reporting from all government departments on the impact of their programmes on women.

Australia was internationally acclaimed for its first Women's Budget statement and was selected as a model of best practice by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women in 1998. State and territory governments soon implemented similar processes with budget statements and by 1993 there was gender-specific analysis in the budgets of all states and territories.

Over time the states and territories ceased publishing statements, partly because of the resource-intensive nature of the exercise and partly because of changes to government and budget reporting mechanisms.

The Office for Women (again renamed in 2004) still produces a Women's Budget statement, though it has evolved throughout the years from being a document for public service specialists to a document for a much broader readership. The highly detailed statements included information about progress on the National Agenda for Women, which was developed in 1985-86, and assessment of the impact of portfolio programmes on women. For the 1990-91 book, budget highlights were introduced and for 1994-95 the book was streamlined by consolidating reporting on current budget initiatives and included a women's impact statement.

In recent years the booklets have focused on initiatives that significantly impact upon women. They have been designed to be more visually appealing, attractive and useful to a broad audience, particularly in this year's release of the Minister's publication, *Women '06: 2006-07 Budget Information*.

Gender analysis in whole-of-government collaboration

Creating the budget material is still a whole-of-government process of consultation, with the responsibility of gender analysis on individual departments and in consultation, where necessary, with the Office for Women. The collaborative nature of the production of the document ensures that the impact of initiatives on women and men is conducted by line agencies, the Office for Women, Treasury and the Department of the Prime Minister and cabinet as part of the budget process. Initiatives are considered for their impact on women and men.

Publication of the Women's Budget material is only one function of the Office for Women. At the national level the office provides a central point of advice on the impact of policies and programmes on women for the whole of national government. Ministries are encouraged to think about women when they are designing policies and implementing programmes. For example, the office has an important role in commenting on cabinet submissions and other policy documents, and offering submissions to Senate inquiries and other legislative matters. This ensures that gender issues are considered throughout the policy process, rather than solely measured at the end.

Australia is a federation. The different levels of government have particular responsibilities that often need to be worked on together to achieve the best outcomes. It is important, therefore, for me as the Minister responsible to work with state Ministers for Women and this is done through regular meetings and joint work, for example on domestic violence.

The federal, state, territory and New Zealand Ministers' conference (MINCO) meets: to provide a federal/state mechanism for the co-ordination and development of policies that affect women especially on those issues which cross federal/state, territory and New Zealand borders; to facilitate action on matters of mutual concern, and to refer and/or present agreed issues of strategies to other ministerial groupings. The Office for Women provides the secretariat support for these yearly meetings.

To ensure equality of the sexes in our policies and delivery of programmes, it is important to report publicly on what is being achieved. In addition to the Women's Budget booklet, the Australian government also produces a well-researched publication of statistical data titled *Women in Australia*, which offers a snapshot of women's wellbeing in Australia.

The benefits of framework can be seen in the government's achievements for women. There have been key advances in the areas of women's education and training, women's employment, women and their families, women in retirement, women's leadership and women's safety. In 2005

Australia was ranked second in the world on the United Nation's Human Development Report's Gender Related Development Index and seventh in the world on its Gender Empowerment Measure.

Some examples of policy change that are of major benefit to women include measures to increase women's retirement incomes. Recent policies around "superannuation splitting upon divorce" focus on helping women to increase their retirement savings. Members of eligible funds are now able to split both personal and employer superannuation contributions with their spouse. Because non-working or low-income "spouses" are predominantly women, this measure helps women to build their retirement savings. Another measure removed the "work test" for anyone under the age of 65, which prevented a person from contributing to superannuation if they did not work for at least 10 hours in a week over the past two years. Because women take more time out of the workforce over their lifetimes than men do, the removal of this restriction is expected to significantly benefit women as compared to men.

Women's leadership

Over the last decade the government has furthered the position of women in society in Australia. However more can be done and we must continue to make advances on complex issues where there remains scope for improvement, particularly in the key areas of better economic security for women, particularly as they grow older, better financial skills, a focus on preventative health for women and a reduction in violence in the lives of women.

The only way that women's equality can be achieved is for women to be able to define, declare and work towards their

aspirations and dreams. This is what leaders do. One of my priorities is to progress initiatives that increase women's participation in leadership. The success of female representation in the parliamentary sector is a testament to Australia's commitment to women.

Women hold one third of federal-controlled positions on government boards and 32 per cent of senior executive service positions in the public service. Parliament now has the highest percentage of female representation it has ever had at 28 per cent. This representation has made a policy impact. One recent example is the introduction and passage of the private Members' Bill to enable the Therapeutic Goods Administration to approve registration of the abortifacient RU486. This Bill was brought by several female Members representing each of the major political parties and was passed through a conscience vote in which 87 per cent of female Senators voted for it.

However, Australia still has a long way to go to make significant inroads in the private sector, where women hold less than nine per cent of board directorships and as many as 47 per cent of the top 200 companies listed on the stock exchange have no women on their boards.

The Australian government has committed A\$15 million over four years to the Women's Leadership and Development Programme to deliver on its election commitment to build women's participation in all parts of Australian life. I will continue the government's strong focus on capacity building for Australian women to build towards the realization of the vision for a country where the skills and talents of women are recognized and used at all levels, especially in the highest levels of decision-making.

SOURCES

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