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Commission on the Status of Women **27 February 2008**

Statement by Ms Julia Burns, Executive Director, Office for Women and Head of Australian delegation to the Commission on the Status of Women

(Check against delivery)

Australia welcomes this important opportunity to contribute to the evaluation of the international community's progress in financing gender equality.

Australia places a high priority on honouring its international commitments to advance gender equality. The Millennium Development Goals, the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW, and the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action remain key frameworks for our work. We are proud to have been part of the process to define our collective goals.

Australia's new Government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, took office in December 2007, and is committed to improving the lives of Australian women, and of women globally, through our role as an international citizen and significant aid donor. The Deputy Prime Minister's position, and six senior ministries are held by women.

In 2007 the UN ranked Australia second in the world on the Gender Related Development Index, and eighth in the world on the Gender Empowerment Measure. These rankings reflect the value Australia places on our commitments to achieve gender equality and our ongoing efforts in financing gender equality across a range of important areas.

The Australian Government is committed to realising gender equality both domestically and internationally. Today I would like to touch on where our new Government's areas of focus will be.

The Government acknowledges the important role of a strong economy, and particularly secure paid work for building a rewarding economic life and addressing intergenerational

disadvantage and social exclusion. To address the barriers facing parents and women seeking to return to work after caring for children, the Government will support women returning to work by providing a fair and balanced industrial relations system, tax cuts that encourage workforce participation, flexible work arrangements, including extra unpaid parental leave, and improved childcare quality, affordability, and availability.

The Government has set up an Office of Work and Family located in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to specifically examine ways to support working families. The Government has asked the Australian Productivity Commission to examine ways to improve support for working parents with new born children.

The Government considers that investing in education is essential to economic growth and stability and offers substantial social and economic returns for individuals and the nation. The Government is committed to greater investment in education, and will be introducing educational reforms that will benefit women and girls.

Government recognises adequate housing is essential for people to participate in the social and economic benefits Australia has to offer. Women, particularly those with children, are especially vulnerable to homelessness and housing stress. The Government has appointed a Minister for Housing, and established a cross-government working group. The Government has also committed to working collaboratively with all levels of government, the private and community sectors to improve the housing outcomes for Australians in need.

Australia provides funding to prevent domestic violence. A *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children*, to be finalised early in the term of the new Government, will set out a national vision for the reduction of violence against women and children. Its aim will be to reduce abuse and protect Australian women and their children from all forms of violence.

The new Australian Government is committed to social inclusion and acknowledges that many Indigenous Australians are socially excluded. On 13 February 2008, the first act of the new Australian Parliament was to offer a national apology to Indigenous Australians for the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and their communities in the past. The Government has resolved to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity. The Government is already working hard to improve outcomes for Indigenous women across education, health, employment, housing, criminal justice and leadership. In addition, the social inclusion agenda will ensure that future government funding decisions pay even greater attention to others who experience the greatest (and often multiple) disadvantages such as sole parents and people with disabilities.

Consistent with this policy, eliminating discrimination against women, and violence against women, are gender policy objectives of the Australian aid program. Australia recognises that violence is a key factor preventing women from exercising their rights and achieving social and economic equality in partner countries.

Australia strongly endorses the Monterrey Consensus and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Australia's gender policy is firmly grounded in the principles in the Paris Declaration – ownership, alignment, harmonization, managing for results, and mutual accountability.

In March 2007 Australia released its aid program gender policy “*gender equality in Australia's aid program: why and how?*”. The policy aims to improve the economic status of women, ensure the equal participation of women in decision-making and leadership, improve health and education outcomes for women, girls, men and boys, and advance gender equality in regional cooperation efforts.

Over the next five years, the Government's aid program will focus efforts on improving the economic status of women. This will include increasing women's access to, and control of, productive resources such as financial and business support services, training and technology.

Importantly, the aid program's gender policy makes provision for assistance to our partner governments to meet their own international commitments on gender equality. Specifically, the aid program will place priority on capacity building for national machineries for women and women's organisations, and improving the use of sex-disaggregated data and gender analysis.

Women's equal participation in conflict prevention is crucial. The aid program aims to assist with this goal. Women's involvement means that not only are the serious issues of disarmament and de-mobilisation addressed, but the equally serious social and economic issues essential to long term, sustainable peace, are also dealt with.

Over the past five years, Australia has continued to work with development partners in the Asia-Pacific region to help implement UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and initiatives to promote the participation of women and consideration of gender issues in economic and trade-related activities.

Australia is proud of the success of our society in advancing the status of women. We are determined to address remaining challenges.

Thank you.

