

Permanent Mission of Australia
CEDAW: Discussion on women's access to justice

We are committed to ensuring that women, both in Australia and throughout the world, are equal before the law, have access to justice mechanisms and experience equal opportunities to participate in governance and decision-making.

These objectives are underpinned in Australia by key tangible measures that we believe can be utilised in developing appropriate and authoritative guidelines that will assist others to achieve in our collective goal of women's access to justice.

Firstly, it is important to create an enabling environment which recognises the fact that women face significant social, institutional and financial barriers to access to justice and are often in need of legal remedies directly related to their gender, including those which address domestic and family violence. In Australia, such measures include guidelines for legal aid commissions to focus their attention on family law to assist those people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing family violence. We also support improved security and enhanced justice for women through Australia's aid program. For example, Australia is supporting efforts in Papua New Guinea to ensure women can access a safe process for making complaints about violence through the establishment of Family and Sexual Violence Units in eight police stations and the introduction of Interim Protection Orders in the court system.

Supporting organisations which focus particularly on providing services to women is another key tool. Australia's Community Legal Services Program (A\$4.926 million in 2012–13) funds community legal centres specifically to provide assistance to women, including Women's Legal Services, Indigenous Women's Projects and Rural Women's Outreach Services. These organisations not only enhance women's access to justice by providing legal information, advice and casework but also undertake community legal education and law reform activities in relation to family law, violence against women and children, discrimination and employment.

We must all also work to intensify efforts to eliminate factors that contribute to women's involvement in the legal system, such as violence against women. Domestically Australia's *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-22* has a strong focus on prevention – aimed at building respectful relationships and working to increase gender equality to prevent violence from occurring in the first place. Another, equally important focus of the National Plan is holding perpetrators to account and encouraging behavioural change.

The centrepiece of Australia's efforts to improve the situation of women in our region is the Pacific Gender Equality Initiative: Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development. Over the next 10 years, Australia will commit \$320 million to this Initiative, which in addition to increasing women's access to economic opportunity and leadership, will increase access to justice for women in informal and formal mechanisms, improve safety through violence prevention and advance legal and regulatory reforms consistently with CEDAW.

Enhancing women's access to justice relies on women feeling empowered and safe. Underpinning this, there needs to be a commitment by member states to sustained and significant support for legal processes and the rule of law. Australia recognises the important role of women in strengthening the rule of law. What we should all now turn our minds to is how the implementation of the law intersects with women's lives.