

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT Women's Policy

**Ms ANDERSON (Women's Policy):** Mr Deputy Speaker, today I outline the government's approach to women's policy. This is my first speech in my role as Minister for Women's Policy. I have spent much of life thinking about what we mean by women's rights. It is good to have the chance to think about it a bit more as minister; to reflect on where we have come from and where we still strive to make progress.

The place of women is difficult in the Northern Territory - different to just about anywhere else in the first world. If I had been appointed to this portfolio in any other Australian government, we all know the speech I would be giving now. It would be a pretty positive story of how women have almost achieved equality in society and culture - equality under the law. There is still some way to go in that story, but the achievements of the past 40 years have been enormous and the journey seems to be almost over.

I cannot give that speech in the Northern Territory. That story describes the lives of some women here; you have only to look around this Chamber to see that. However, for many Indigenous women, it is almost as though the great battle for equality had never been fought. If you look at the teenage pregnancy, education levels, unemployment, and particularly at violence, thousands of women in the Territory are no better off than they were 40 years ago. In fact, often they are worse off. This is partly because they are Indigenous. They share many problems with Indigenous men but, in large part, it is because they are women.

I am thinking especially of violence. Violence goes to the heart of women's inequality in any society. Today, Indigenous women are far more likely to be its victim than anyone else in the country. I have lived with that brutal fact all my life and it continues to distress me. It continues to anger me.

Women are being bashed and abused. Women are dying. Safety is not just women's business; it is everyone's business and everyone has failed. Because the Territory has such a high proportion of Indigenous people in its population, this prevalence of violence, of women's pain and suffering, makes the challenge of women's policies here more urgent and more pressing than in any other place. It also makes it appropriate; sadly, that the Minister for Indigenous Advancement also be the Minister for Women's Policy. Having said that, I acknowledge that the story of women in the Northern Territory is much bigger than that. It is a story with many positives starting with the stories about the unique contributions made in all the traditional societies from which the people of the Territory come. For Indigenous women, it is the story of tremendous resilience, of all that they have done to hold families and communities together during times of enormous change and stress.

It is also, as I have acknowledged, partly the story of progress as experienced by women in other parts of Australia and the world where most women have achieved education and jobs and the freedom to do things women have never done before in the history of the world. I want to celebrate that story of progress for two reasons, first, because it is relevant to many women in the Territory and, second, because even for those women who are still behind and still suffering oppression and violence, it is inspiring. I want all girls and young women here to know what their rights are and to see the possibilities available for their own lives, and I want the men to see it, too. History shows that achieving women's equality, just like racial equality, is a job for everyone. I want men to know that if they do not help in that job, they are condemning many of our women to continue to suffer in a way that is almost unique in so-called developed nations. They are condemning our women to an historical and national backwater. As Minister for Women's Policy, I will do my best to tell all those stories and make sure that everyone is aware of them. I will do all I can to ensure that women here have the chance to achieve the possibilities, the stories revealed to us.

The solution to women's problems does not lie just with government. We know from advances that have been achieved for women in other places that they can only be achieved if everyone pitches in - NGOs, voluntary organisations and churches and philanthropists. We know that the many women have been successful need to turn around and lend a hand to younger women; many are doing this already. I hope we can develop some ways of encouraging even more of this sort of inspiration and help. I want to acknowledge that there are two broad groups: the Indigenous women I have mentioned and the many others who have benefited from the reforms of the past 40 years. Just like women all around Australia, I want to celebrate the progress of that group. The progress has been impressive. To draw on some recent New South Wales figures, typical of most Australia, these days 70% of girls complete Year 12 compared with 63% of boys. Girls are still less likely than boys to do an apprenticeship or traineeship; however, even that gap is narrowing. In admissions to university women, have charged ahead with 57% of university students now women.

How things have changed in less than a lifetime. Today, most Australian women can do just about anything they want. This was not always so. Not only were there all sorts of prejudice, there were laws and regulations that made women second class human beings. Women were simply excluded from many places, jobs and positions. There were unequal rates of pay and there were rules like the one in the Commonwealth public service that said female employees had to resign if they got married. If you looked at the public face of society

outside of entertainment, women are almost invisible. Back then, there were almost no female politicians or business leaders. The only female leaders of any kind were in those all-female careers or institutions such as nursing and schools. It had been like that for all of history so when you think of how much has changed in those 50 years which in historical terms are just a blink of an eye. It is amazing.

One of the things that strikes me, looking around this Chamber, is we have one of the highest proportions of women in parliament in Australia. In most of the chambers it is a lot less and it is puzzling that while women have progressed in all sorts of ways in the past half century, they have not managed to move into all of the many positions of leadership. Of course, there have been some successes. Look at the gender of the Governor-General, the Prime Minister and several recent Premiers and Chief Ministers around the country. But politics in most places is still very male dominated.

If the feminists of the 1970s had been told that, I think they would have been surprised. They would have thought that in politics at least you could have expected women to achieve parity. I think they would also be surprised by the even greater absence of women at the top level of business. Maybe they would not have expected women to achieve parity with men at the CEO level but they would have expected to see more women up there than we have now. There are hardly any women running major companies either here or anywhere else.

One reason for this is women tend to avoid careers from which highly paid corporate managers and leaders emerge, such as engineering. In New South Wales only 12 per cent of engineering students are women. We tend to work in lower paid areas such as health, health care, education, community services, retail and administration. This explains why there are more women on the boards of government committees – 37%, our not-for-profit organisations – 29%, and in public companies where it is just 17%. It is why we tend to find far more women managers in school where 50% of all principals are women and in the public sector than in the corporate world. But in every area the number of women drops right away the higher up an organisation you go and the closer you get to the real seats of power. There is actually a problem for all of us, men and women.

Every woman in a group raises its group IQ. Shelley Penn is the national president of the Australian Institute of Architects. She has pointed to statistics that show that women make up approximately 45% of university architecture students. They comprise less than 2% of directors of architectural practices. This is despite the fact that research shows that the more women there are on company boards the more successful that company will be. Other studies have found the same thing in communities and group decision-making. So the experts are telling us you need men and women to make the best decisions. Society still has an enormous deficit in what we might call 'female intelligence' and one of my aims in this portfolio will be to try and publicise the fact to get people thinking about how we might be able to harness that extra intelligence for the good of everyone.

Another development that I think would have surprised the feminists of the 70s is the situation today where we are looking after the children. Many feminists 40 years ago believed that before long men would share not just half of the university positions and the good jobs but half the effort of looking after children. That has not happened. We would have done well in education and I was reading the other day that over half the number of law students are now women. Women are also well represented in good jobs but despite these advances, women are still doing most of the child care in their families. What is the reason for that?

Some people blame it on men not wanting to surrender their privileges, but that does not quite fit. Men have been prepared to go a long way with feminism in all sorts of ways from doing more housework and changing language and manners, to education and jobs. So why would they have put their foot down when it comes to child care? Maybe it is biological. I know many people believe men and women are fundamentally different, emotionally and even intellectually. You often hear boys are better at maths, girls at language. You often hear men are better at map reading while women have more empathy. Dozens of books have been written about this, such as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, and there is no doubt they are based on a lot of academic research

We need to be cautious about accepting that. We need to be cautious about accepting any claims women are naturally different to men in how we think and feel. Once you look closely at the so-called evidence it does not really stack up. Recently, there was an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* which referred to Janet Hyde, one of America's leading academic psychologist. Dr Hyde looked at 5000 academic studies on gender differences involving seven million people and found almost 80% of so-called gender differences are small or close to zero.

Let me give you some examples. Many people believe women talk more than men but when a researcher tested this by putting small recorders on 400 many and women he found each sex talks, on average, the same 16 000 words a day. It is also not true women disclose much more about themselves in conversations than men do, or that men interrupt much more than women. We need to be very cautious where we make any assumptions about differences between men and women. Academic research is telling us there is still plenty of unconscious prejudice out there shaping the way we think about the sexes.

If we expect people to act in certain ways maybe they will but that does not make it natural. My guess is it is possible women's behaviour will change in the future. I admit the jury is still out on childcare. I will be watching with real interest to see if men become more involved. That will be important because I suspect that is the only way we will see a big increase in the number of women in top positions. A high proportion of top female executives either do not have children or, if they do, have nannies and have had them pretty well since their children were born. Obviously, that is not something many women can afford to do.

As I mentioned earlier, the problems of many Indigenous women in the Territory are worlds away from problems of leadership. I would like to say a few more words about the terrible effect of violence on many women. Although it is a problem for many Indigenous people, girls and women are more likely to be its victims. It is well-known they are five, 10, even 20 times more likely to be abused or bashed than any other Australia women. The exact figure depends on the type of crime and the research you read, but the general situation is clear and is tragic.

As the minister for Women's Policy, it is the single most important problem facing women in the Northern Territory. For years we simply denied it. In the 1990s it was not politically correct to talk about violence against Indigenous women committed by Indigenous men. Feminists who were mainly white did not want to talk about it in case they offended Indigenous men, which I always thought was pretty strange. I remember the fight we had to get ATSIC to even recognise the problem.

One breakthrough came in 1999 with the report of Queensland academic, Bonnie Robinson, who led a large group of Indigenous women who produced a ground-breaking report. After that it became harder to cover-up the shocking level of violence against women in Indigenous communities.

I was involved in the struggle to form an ATSIC Women's Advisory Board; it did not occur until 2003, which was pretty late in the day for ATSIC. Sadly, the violence of those days is still with us. Around the world people agree the fundamental job of governments is to protect the security of their people. It is the job successive governments of the Northern Territory have failed to do well, and the job that has frustrated most of the decent and well-intentioned people who attempted to tackle it. The problem is the violence is so common you simply cannot hope to stop it all.

In some communities you need a police station on every corner. What has to be done is to attack it at its roots. Violence is the fruit of a tree of masculine idleness that grows in the soil of welfare dependency. To stop the violence you have to destroy that tree. To do this we need to cut off the welfare so the tree of idleness dies and the new tree can take its place - the tree of employment planted in the soil of improved education.

These are big solutions for a big problem. It is the tragedy of the Territory, and the tragedy of its women, that no one at the Commonwealth level is talking about them. Many people said the intervention was unnecessary, challenging. In fact, it was only a bandaid, which was why it has had little impact.

I commend the many good people who work tirelessly to feed children, and arrest and punish men who beat and rape women. But, these are all bandaids. Until we get a federal government that is prepared to initiate profound welfare reforms, men will not take jobs and, until men take jobs and get self-respect, they will keep drinking and beating and abusing women.

As the new Minister for Women's Policy, I say that everything else I will have to deal with in the portfolio shrinks into insignificance in comparison to this. It is a puzzle why federal governments of both parties have not given us these welfare reforms. There is nothing difficult about them. As I have said before in this place, all that is required is that Indigenous people be treated the same as Australians. To not do so is racist. Although as the federal government makes the laws, I suppose it will be the last one to recognise that. I say to people in Canberra, we are not children, treat us like adults and we will start to behave like adults.

In conclusion, I observe that the battle of equality between the sexes is, in many ways, the same as the battle for equality between races and cultures. Women used to be treated like children and told what was best for them. Only when that stops could they take their place in the broader society. We are living in fortunate time in history because so many advances have occurred, but there is still much to be done - much for Indigenous people and for women, and even more for Indigenous women. As the Minister for both Indigenous Advancement and Women's Policy in this government, I embrace the challenge and acknowledge its immensity.

I also acknowledge that although many women in the Territory are still suffering, many others have benefitted from the advance of the past 40 years. They have completed school, gone to university, taken interesting and well-paid jobs, travelled, and done amazing things. I celebrate their achievements and invite any of them, or anyone else who has ideas on how we can improve the lot of women in the Territory, to get in touch with me.

Your experience is valuable and you are an inspiration for girls now growing up here and wondering what their place in the world might be and how high they should aim.

I finish with the observation that although women should be able to do anything, we should resist the temptations to define success solely in our terms. Career and public success is not the only way to be a fulfilled and valuable human being. Success for most women is more likely to be a mixture of private and public achievements. One of the important things female leaders can do is stand up for different forms of success. We want a society where women can succeed in the same way men do, but we still want to be a society that values other forms of success too. Thank you for the opportunity to make this general observation of my new portfolio. As I said earlier, I will be making another statement with more specific policy proposals at the United Nations International Women's Day reception on 8 March.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I move that the Assembly take note of the statement and I table the documents I have quoted in this statement.