

Status of Women, and the Office of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner.

The Committee welcomed: the measures and strategies that had been put in place to prevent and eliminate violence against women; the establishment of the first comprehensive national statistical profile on the extent and nature of violence against women; the strong commitment to reducing the incidence of domestic violence including through preventive measures; the existence of a national health policy for women; legislation enabling prosecution of Australians who committed sexual offences abroad; steps taken to further strengthen women's equal access to justice and eliminate discrimination and gender bias in areas such as legal aid, violence against women, immigration and refugee law; and, Australia's support for the preparation of an optional protocol to the Convention on a complaints procedure.

The areas of concern identified by the Committee were: the government's apparent shift in attention and commitment to the human rights of women and the achievement of gender equality as indicated by the 38 per cent cut in the budget of the Office of the Status of Women, and a similar reduction of funding to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission; the weakened role of national machinery in providing policy advice on equality issues and monitoring the effective implementation of such policies; policy changes that apparently slowed down, or reversed, progress in achieving equality between women and men, in such areas as housing and childcare programmes, and employment assistance; the delay in appointing a Sex Discrimination Commissioner; the fact that resources for programmes and policies benefiting women or aimed at overcoming discrimination, such as in health, in the provision of legal aid services, and training and awareness programmes for health workers, judicial, professional and others on violence against women, might be subjected to disproportionate budget cuts; the fact that violence against women, notwithstanding major efforts, remained a central concern with an estimated 7 per cent of women having experienced some type of violence in the course of a year; the absence of data concerning violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and assessment of programmes directed at reducing such violence; and, paedophilia and sex tourism involving Australian men, primarily in Asian countries, and the situation of women brought to Australia as brides.

The Committee noted with concern: new legislation on industrial relations related to the negotiation of individual contracts between employer and employee which may have a disproportionately negative impact on women; Australia's reservation to the Convention with regard to paid maternity leave and its non-ratification of ILO Convention 103; and, the continuing adverse situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and migrant women, including a higher incidence of maternal mortality, lower life expectancy, reduced access to the full range of health services, a high incidence of violence, including domestic violence, high unemployment rates and difficulties compounded by an apparent rise in racism and xenophobia.

The Committee recommended that the government:

- ▶ carefully monitor the impact of recent policy changes in all areas covered by the Convention, conduct analyses of

the successes and shortcomings of the new policies with a view to providing data for future action and design a long-term strategy aimed at the full implementation of the Convention;

- ▶ conduct an evaluation of the Workplace Relations Act of 1996, assessing its impact upon women of different age groups, with different educational levels and in different occupational groups and assess whether the Act leads to increased or decreased part-time and casual work, and its impact on women workers' benefits and on workers with family responsibilities, particularly women's ability to obtain maternity leave;
- ▶ conduct a similar evaluation and assessment for the new childcare benefit scheme;
- ▶ assess the benefits of a continuing national women's health policy and ensure that any further change in that policy does not lead to decreased access by women, especially vulnerable groups of women, to comprehensive health services;
- ▶ have translated the Convention and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for non-English-speaking Australians;
- ▶ adopt a comprehensive strategy to eliminate violence against women, with an emphasis on prevention, and with sufficient funding;
- ▶ identify ways to involve women's groups in the development of strategies to reduce violence in the media, including electronic media, and ensure their participation in the development of self-regulatory codes of practice of the media;
- ▶ noting the differing state provisions in relation to prostitution, assess the effectiveness of the varying measures in reducing the exploitation of prostitution;
- ▶ collect statistical data on the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in the workforce, in decision-making, in politics and administration, and in the judiciary, with a view to enhancing programmes that will benefit them;
- ▶ develop the necessary legislative and policy measures to ensure women's equal access to individual ownership of native land;
- ▶ strengthen its support for women's studies, provide funding for research and teaching, and facilitate international academic exchange and cooperation in that field; and,
- ▶ resume its active and visible participation in international forums on women's equality, such as in the Commonwealth and the United Nations.

Torture

Signed: 10 December 1985; ratified: 8 August 1989

Australia's second periodic report was due 6 September 1994.

Rights of the Child

Signed: 22 August 1990; ratified: 17 December 1990.

Australia's second periodic report was due 15 January 1998.

Reservations and Declarations: Paragraph (c) of article 37.