Speech

Address By

Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

On the occasion of

International Women’s Day - “Half the Sky” IWDA event

Melbourne Recital Centre, Melbourne
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Therese McCarthy
President, IWDA

Joanna Hayter
Executive Director

Our sisters from the Pacific:

Sharon Bhagwan Rolls,
Executive Director Femlink Pacific, advocacy for UNSCR 1325, community media, for women, peace and human security concerns.

Jennifer Wate from the Solomon Islands Development Trust, who is currently studying Community Development at Victoria University.

Papali’i Doctor Viopapa Annandale, admired in Samoa for her work with Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women’s Association – speaking out for women and children’s rights.

Merilyn Tahi
Co-ordinator, Vanuatu Women’s Centre. Her leadership in her community, her lifelong commitment to women’s empowerment, and her action on violence against women, are inspiring. I treasure her example.

My friends, I want you to know how thrilled and delighted I am to be sharing this celebration of International Women’s Day with you, in your charming, elegant, hospitable city.
I offer my respects to the Traditional Keepers of this land, and I acknowledge the debt of gratitude I owe to wise Indigenous women who have taught me across my life what it means to be an Elder.

I love IWD. I love the sisterhood, the solidarity that brings us together. Women around the world cheering the contributions women make in every aspect of our lives: in the home, on the job, in our neighbourhoods. As mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, learners, citizens and leaders. A time for us to pause, to reflect, to honour those on whose shoulders we stand. The textile workers who 102 years ago marched in New York protesting against low wages, long working hours, inhumane conditions, child labour. They were young women, but weary worn. Their poignant cries for bread and roses. We need bread to live, but we want the roses too. We want some of the lovely things in life. Sunlight, music, laughter. Generations since have fought hard for the rights we enjoy today. Feisty, visionary, courageous women. They broke down barriers: to education, to the professions, to good jobs and working conditions, to economic benefits, maternity leave, reproductive rights, to protection from discrimination, to refuge from domestic violence. Inspiring leaders, dedicated followers, the finest ideals. Our Australian Women’s movement.

We take pride in our progress and our heroines. Australian feminism has a great tradition of women’s organisations, and a deep sense of service. It makes my heart sing to see so many here this evening. Determined, influential, skilled, strong, energetic. Shining through, your purpose, your generosity, always care and compassion for others. This concern is seen in our
First, I want to express my admiration and respect for the outstanding work IWDA does, making a tangible difference to the lives of women in their communities. Yours is a proud history across more than a generation – one that began with the vision, wisdom and experience of three remarkable women – Wendy Poussard, Wendy Rose and Ruth Pfanner. I guess I don’t have to tell you that IWDA was conceived around a kitchen table. The memories of your nascent days are fresh in my mind. Tenacious grassroots action. Meetings in pokey rooms, fringe buildings in Fitzroy and Camperdown. Founders who spoke in practical terms, in language we understood about the way women were virtually invisible as planners and managers of development programs; about the critical need for a different approach to development, one focused on equity and rights for women, that would ensure women their access to food, income, safe houses, education. Most importantly, about networks with local women’s organisations.

Today you have project partnerships in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, along the Thai-Burma border, and Timor Leste. Research collaborations extending to Africa, in Angola, Malawi, Mozambique, the Philippines and Indonesia. IWDA has shown again and again how development is more effective when women are in there, right from the start. When barriers to their involvement are identified and addressed, when local leadership is promoted.

My friends, awareness of the power of investing in women has become more widespread in the development sector in the last few years. Hillary Clinton spoke about it at the APEC Women and Economy Summit in San Francisco in 2011. “When it comes to the enormous challenge of our time to systematically and relentlessly pursue more economic activity in all our lands, we don’t have a person to waste, and we certainly don’t have a gender to waste either.” IWDA has been influential in getting the gender equality message across, translating our ideals about justice, equity and sustainability into action through the projects you support, through the training you do, building skills in the sector in gender sensitivity.

Friends, so often I have learnt that: whoever we are, wherever we come from, whatever our backgrounds, women share powerful bonds across language, culture, race, religion. Bonds that go deep, that are strong, that speak a universal language. Connections found in our shared commitment to the next generation, to our children and grandchildren, to giving to their futures the best that we have to give. I rejoice in them, and no more than when I represent our country overseas. I always include a women’s meeting in my program. I know that’s the way to find out about the matters that mean most to me about people’s lives. Women leaders from every sector – from academe, NGOs, health, family planning, business, lawyers, teachers. In Cyprus, Brunei, Nauru, Ethiopia, Tuvalu, Jordan, the Solomons, South Korea, around a table, in a hospital garden, on a mat in the Za’atri Refugee Camp on the Syrian border. Universal themes shine through. Again and again, deep concerns are spoken about advances for women being wound back. Again and always we talk about the violence that kills and damages women. The fundamental violation of women’s rights that remains widespread and affects all nations.

In the past few months all of us have been outraged by reports of rapes, murders, gross attacks on young women in countries across the world. For many of our sisters in our region, in our neighbourhood, violence occurs at pandemic levels. Truly alarming rates. In PNG, for instance, 67% of women are beaten by their husbands, close to 100% in the Highlands. The Pacific is a region where gender equality and rates of violence against women are among the worst in the world. How can these terrible, terrible things be happening we ask? IWD is not a time for us to be overwhelmed; to feel powerless. IWD is a time for us to believe, to know, to remember, that we can do something. In this room there is extraordinary potential, power, influence – and yes, privilege. We must use these for those who are not seen. Those who are not heard.

I am very proud of our fellow Australians who are doing this every day. Sometimes in quiet corners, giving, sharing, caring, fundraising in their communities, as members of generous-hearted, hard working NGOs, as advocates, as volunteers, often young ones, their lives changed by the experience, our AusAid workers in the field. I treasure conversations with them. I’m enormously impressed by their commitment, their understandings, their professionalism. It’s always different to see things for yourself. I so often hear myself saying “I wish you could have been there with me”.

Last year I made State visits to eight Pacific Island countries. I will never forget the children of Kiribati - so beautiful, so smiling, so shining, kilometres of them along the road from the airport to the meeting place. The flowers, the feasts, the dancing, harmony, rhythm, arms, hips. I spent time in hospitals, schools, with students: visiting programs for special needs children, technical training. Good Samaritan sisters – decades of service. In Tuvalu and Samoa, the honour of addressing Parliament. In the Federated States of Micronesia, at Pohnpei, a brilliant food community initiative, teaching kids creative
ways about healthy eating. I observed in every country, women’s leadership and engagement at a community level, so keen to talk about their involvement in women’s issues: I met women in high level jobs in government, in law, finance, governance. I will never forget the hands stretched out to me in friendship, the sense of family, of community, of pride in the achievements of young women in education and employment, the role models. The joy in a rich culture, lovely and loved traditions.

But I learnt too that the picture of women in the South Pacific is a mixed one. The romantic image of tropical islands and their geographic proximity to Australia belie serious sustainability and social equity problems, not least entrenched attitudes towards women. Many Australians would be shocked to learn of the prevalence of domestic violence, the low value attached to women’s participation in the economy and the under-representation of women in politics and civil society. That is why the initiative announced by our Government last year, Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development, is so important. A huge financial commitment (320 million dollars) over ten years – a much longer period than usual for aid projects – to lift the status of women in the island countries. With partners on the ground, we want to manage the issues that are plain to see – the results of women being battered and bullied, of poor or scarce facilities for sexual and maternal health, of reduced access to education for women and girls. We want to ensure that women’s voices are heard when it comes to development decisions. Ultimately, we want to help the women and men of the Pacific change the culture where women have been undervalued, ignored and abused for too long. This will take a huge effort and it may take a long time, but it is imperative, for intrinsic humanitarian reasons, and common sense, that we take action, get on with it.

From island homes in the unbelievably beautiful Pacific Ocean I returned to Australia deeply committed to doing all I can to urge Australians to connect and reconnect with our friends there: to visit, to learn, to engage, to give women leaders the encouragement we all need and depend on from each other to support women to have their voices heard – in their homes, their communities, their workplaces, their neighbourhoods – and especially in their parliaments. I think we have some fabulous potential candidates here with us this evening.

My friends, allow me to conclude my remarks with some words from feminist theologian Carole Fontaine. They capture beautifully the essence of IWDA and International Women’s Day.

*Do not show me tiny crowds of handpicked men; Do not regale me with films of gunfire in the air. Show me battalions of little girls, if you can – Healthy and learned, with futures and names. Show me their mothers, with homes all arrayed In abundance and peace, with colour and song.*

*It will only be victory when the women sing in the streets ... safe to choose, to live, to learn, to love. It will only be victory when the women sing.*

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