Speech

Address By

His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd)

On the occasion of

International Women’s Day lunch

National Convention Centre, Canberra
5 March 2015

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to elders, past and present.

• Virginia (Haussegger), thank you very much for that introduction.
• Ms Julie McKay, Executive Director, Australian National Committee for UN Women and other board members present today – including Ms Carmel McGregor, thank you for welcoming Lynne and me on arrival here today;
• The Honourable Yvette Berry, ACT Minister for Women;
• Air Chief Marshal Geoff Brown, representing the Chief of Defence Force, and there’s a good group of service folk over there I’m delighted to see;
• Distinguished guests;
• Ladies and gentlemen.

Virginia said it all. This is an amazingly full room, a large room, literally 1,200 people, and it’s a little intimidating to look out there.

I sincerely thank you for asking me to join you in celebrating this year’s International Women’s Day – 40 years since it achieved recognition by the United Nations, and 20 years since the ground breaking conference in Beijing that delivered a comprehensive human rights platform for action on gender equality, peace, education, economic justice and development, and an end to violence against women and girls.

I was delighted to be approached by the Australian National Committee for UN Women to take over the reins as Patron from my predecessor, Dame Quentin Bryce, who is without doubt one of our nation’s most esteemed advocates for women’s rights and gender equality.

This is an important day. The essential reason this day exists, and persists, is because of course we have not yet achieved gender equality.

Putting aside, if we ever can, the fundamental tenets of humanity, it defies logic that societies around the world have acquiesced or, worse still, assisted in denying women the same rights and opportunities enjoyed by men.

It is appalling in 2015 to have to keep pointing out these staggering facts that have been so long documented:

• Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours and produce half of the world's food;
• Australian women work more hours than men each day in paid and unpaid work; more are tertiary educated; when there are more women in senior management roles, companies do better on all indicators;
• Women spend far more time caring for their children; women look after their health better; and women live longer.

And yet – and there are a lot of “yets”, here’s just a handful:
Women earn only 10% of the world’s income; own less than 1% of the world’s property; and represent 70% of the world’s poor;

Australian women make up less than 50% of the workforce and nationally earn 18.8% less in full-time wages than men;

Only 3.5% of CEOs in the top 200 ASX companies are women;

And, tragically, one-third of women have reported experiencing some form of physical, sexual or psychological violence by former or current partners.

One of the great privileges of being Governor-General is that I get to see and learn about the work of so many extraordinary Australians. Among them are people who are prepared to tackle big, difficult issues honestly, pragmatically and head on.

Late last year, on the eve of White Ribbon Day, I joined the Prime Minister, the Opposition Leader, parliamentarians, community leaders and advocates at Parliament House here in Canberra to support the efforts of the Police Commissioners from right across Australia and New Zealand in sending a message to communities that violence against women and children has their full attention and zero tolerance.

Today, on International Women’s Day, I want to reinforce this message. Violence against women and their children is perpetrated predominantly by men. It is a product of inequality and the undeserved sense of power and control it offers the advantaged over the disadvantaged.

Males who in acting this way offend us all, believe they have a right to control others and to exercise this control through physical, sexual or psychological violence against the women and children in their lives.

Well I want to say on all your behalf, there is no such right, there never was, there never will be. Far from a right, it is a heinous crime and violation of human rights, committed at immeasurable cost to human lives and whole communities.

I implore all men to call it what it is, to act on it for what it is, to make male perpetrators accountable. And I pledge my support today for the women greats, the champions of this mounting, Australia-wide movement:

- Natasha Stott Despoja, as Australia’s Ambassador for Women and Girls, and as Chair of Our Watch, a national organisation working at the grassroots and in institutions to change the culture, behaviours and attitudes that underpin violence against women and their children, and one that I’m enormously proud to be Patron of.
- And then, there is of course, that force of nature Rosie Batty, our new Australian of the Year who, in the midst of her own incalculable grief at the loss of her son, Luke, has single-handedly put family violence on the nation’s table in a way we cannot ignore. I want Rosie to know that I’m a wholehearted supporter in all her efforts in this society-changing campaign.

These women, and with them, thousands more women, and men, are working daily to reverse the scourge of violence against women and children, and to reclaim women’s right to participate in life, work and society on equal terms with men, free from harm and threats of harm.

Here’s another statistic just to finish: only around 30% of the nominations for awards in the Australian honours system are for women. Again, it defies logic. I know you're out there; you’re not looking for accolades; I know that’s not what drives you. But the rest of us need to see and learn from what you do. So, here’s my blunt and noisy plea – nominate women who are making a difference in Australian society.

“Long Live International Women’s Day” was a lead banner in the early International Women’s Day rallies. With so much work to do, this day has so much more life in it yet.

Thank you UN Women and all your supporters here today and, indeed, around the country and the world, for your work and motivation. Long Live International Women’s Day.

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