

CSW62 Multi-Stakeholder Forum
Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the
empowerment of rural women and girls

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Statement by Ambassador Gillian Bird, Permanent Representative to the United Nations,
New York

Panel 4: Strengthening laws, policies and programmes to end violence and harmful
practices against rural women and girls

Madam Chair

Eliminating violence and harmful practices against women and girls is a priority for Australia. It is an issue that Australia will actively pursue during our current term on the Human Rights Council.

As we are all too well aware, women and girls continue to experience violence and sexual assault at unacceptable rates. This directly affects their ability to contribute socially and economically to their community.

In Australia, on average, one woman is killed every week at the hands of a current or former partner. Around one in three Australian women has experienced physical violence, almost one in five has experienced sexual violence and more than half of all women in Australia have experienced some form of sexual harassment during their lifetime.

These statistics are alarming enough, and yet, we also know that the situation is often worse for women living in rural areas. In Australia, women and girls living in rural areas are more likely to experience intimate partner violence than those living in urban areas. This violence is compounded by the multiple and intersecting forms

of disadvantage women in rural areas can face, which is especially the case for Indigenous women.

Madam Chair, given we have limited time and a full agenda, today I'll focus on a couple of priority areas where Australian practice can hopefully inform our discussions at the international level during the 62nd session of the CSW in March: targeted policy responses, addressing harmful practices and the importance of engaging national human rights institutions (NHRIs) in addressing violence against women and girls.

TARGETED RESPONSES

Australia has developed targeted responses for rural and remote communities in our *National Action Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children*. The Plan recognises that women from rural areas may face social isolation and have less opportunity to access services, including for sexual and reproductive health.

The Plan is complemented by a Coalition, connecting rural women with local and state-based networks to ensure better social and economic outcomes. As this event demonstrates today, we must work in cooperation with our non-government partners to address violence against rural women. In this vein, I am pleased to note that two rural Australian women leaders will be on the official Australian Government delegation to CSW this year.

The particular challenges Indigenous women face in rural and remote communities in Australia also required targeted responses – Responses that include training for frontline health services to enable them to deliver flexible, innovative, inclusive and integrated services.

HARMFUL PRACTICES

Madam Chair, Australia firmly believes that tradition or culture cannot be cited as a justification for the erosion of women's and girls' human rights. Female Genital Mutilation is unlawful and a breach of the human rights of women and girls.

It is a criminal offence in Australia to perform Female Genital Mutilation or to remove a child from Australia for the purposes of performing FGM. There are also mandatory reporting requirements for frontline workers who are concerned that a child may be at risk of physical or sexual abuse, including FGM.

Early forced marriage is also a breach of girls' human rights. All children under the age of 16 are protected from forced marriage in Australia. These protections are based on the presumption that a person under the age of 16 does not understand the nature and effect of a marriage ceremony.

The Australian Federal Police have specialised teams investigating forced marriage. Since forced marriage was criminalised in Australia in 2013, over 180 cases have been referred to police and 46 young people have accessed support.

ROLE OF NHRIS

Madam Chair, Australia's national human rights institution, the Australian Human Rights Commission, aims to empower all Australians, including rural women and girls, to understand and exercise their human rights. This involves developing resources and providing training to schools, workplaces and the community to increase awareness of rights and responsibilities, including in relation to eliminating violence and discrimination.

The Australian Human Rights Commission also has a dedicated Sex Discrimination Commissioner who works to address sex discrimination and promote gender equality throughout Australia. I am pleased to note that our Sex Discrimination Commissioner will be on our official delegation to CSW and I encourage others to include members of their NHRI in their delegation.

CLOSING

Madam Chair, our collective challenge is to ensure that the principles of consent and respect are promoted in all our daily interactions, be they in public or in the privacy of our own homes. Australia will continue its efforts to ensure that women are treated with respect and that their security is ensured. As we head towards CSW, we make this commitment not only to Australians, but to all women and children across the world.

Thank you.