

Panel Title: Advancing Gender Equality and Empowering women in green economies in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication

Acknowledgements

Madame Bachelet, Excellencies, fellow panellists.

Distinguished guests.

Australia's strong commitment to gender equality is well-established and pursued at the highest levels of our government.

Our Prime Minister, our Head of State, the Deputy Leader of our Federal Opposition, two of our state and territory leaders, and thirty percent of our parliamentarians are women, each working actively to promote the role of women in achieving a sustainable future for all.

At home, our government and civil society operate in a close partnership to empower women to participate in all aspects of society and the economy – the green economy.

And globally, Australia is a determined international advocate on these issues with our partners, such as UN Women, at forums like this, through the work of multilateral institutions, through my position as Global Ambassador for Women and Girls and, critically, through our aid program – in which gender equality is a central and cross-cutting issue.

Australia in its region

As an island nation situated among a large number of small and particularly fragile states, Australia has a unique position and therefore particular responsibilities, especially, to my mind, to regional women, who face enormous challenges.

Pacific women lack access to basic services, to markets and to opportunities for social and economic advancement. Pacific men outnumber women in paid employment outside the agricultural sector by two to one.

In some Pacific countries, legal restrictions still exist that prevent women owning land, owning a business or getting a bank account and there are practical and normative constraints that make it extremely difficult for Pacific women to enter parliament.

Globally women make up just over 19 percent of parliamentarians but in the Pacific the proportion is just 2.3 percent.

Appallingly, two out of three women in some Pacific countries report experiencing physical and sexual abuse in their lifetime; and Pacific women suffer poorer health

outcomes than their male counterparts, experiencing persistently high child and maternal mortality rates.

Our Pacific neighbours endure more than their fair share of natural disasters. And they are highly vulnerable to climatic changes.

As the principal producers of food and providers of water and fuel, Pacific women are at the frontline of adverse impacts caused by changes in the natural environment.

Australia's approach

These complex, interconnected challenges - in the Pacific and globally - are not new but a new approach is needed to address them. They are not uncommon but uncommon creativity and innovation is necessary to overcome them.

As with sustainable development more broadly, the green economy must wear a woman's face.

UN Under-Secretary General Sha Zukang has said, "Sustainability is about women. Society flourishes when women's leadership, creativity and initiative are recognised, embraced and harnessed. In many countries, women are the champions of green economy, practising sustainable agriculture, nurturing our natural resources, and promoting renewable energy."

And this is what Australia, too, is seeking to promote by mainstreaming gender equality across its foreign policy and development assistance programs, working in all our partner countries with governments, communities and civil society to help them establish and achieve gender equality goals.

We are helping to collect quantitative data to drive policy change, and to evaluate interventions that succeed and identify those that don't, and we are working with organisations like UN Women, to raise awareness of the issues and advocate for change.

The Green Economy and Women's Empowerment

Immense benefits will flow from placing women centrally in the green economy.

Closing the gender gap in agriculture will raise agricultural output, and reduce the number of hungry people in the world by an estimated 12-17 percent, so Australia is investing in women's participation in agriculture.¹

Engaging women in developing and disseminating clean technologies, for example solar-powered lights and cookstoves, will increase adoption, drive innovation, reduce environmental risks and improve the health and safety of families.

¹ FAO The State of Food and Agriculture Report, 2011

Increased access to new technologies – such as mobile phones and the internet - will advance educational outcomes for women and open up new economic opportunities. Australia is working actively in this arena, for example, in partnership with the USAID, GSMA and Visa Inc under the GSMA mWomen Programme to increase mobile phone ownership among women in the developing world.

Education for women and girls is essential for their participation in the green economy, particularly in non-traditional areas such as engineering where the jobs growth will be.

At present women account for approximately 20 percent of energy sector jobs and these mostly in non-technical fields.²

For this reason, in April this year Australia was pleased, as a member of a coalition of nine countries, to launch the Clean Energy Education and Empowerment Initiative to advance women's participation and leadership in the clean energy field, where women's perspectives and contributions are too often absent.

But in our embrace of the green economy we must be alert to the risk that initiatives will add to, rather than lighten, the existing enormous burden on women.

We must fully consider, for example, the informal and care economies when we think about green growth and the green economy.

And we must find concrete ways to ensure that women are not marginalised in the process of achieving a green economy, and prevented from accessing new technologies and innovations.

The Future Women Want is clear, the path to achieve it is perhaps hazier. But our common commitment to this future – clearly in evidence here today – will undoubtedly sharpen global focus and strengthen resolve to put women at the centre of the green economy.

Thank you.

² International Labour Foundation for Sustainable Development, 2009. Green Jobs and Women Workers: Employment, Equity, Equality