



"Women's policy has been sidelined and ignored for too long by the major parties. The Democrats would put women's issues at the top of the agenda."

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Democrats' Spokesperson for
the Status of Women*

Women's Policy Audit 2007

The unfinished agenda...

Photo courtesy of Daniel Noone

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Introduction:

The Australian Democrats believe there needs to be a comprehensive approach to tackling women's policy in this country. We have been at the forefront of calls for action in the areas of domestic violence, reproductive health, discrimination, work and family, and education. Yet women's rights continue to lag on the political agenda.

It is 105 years since women attained the right to vote and stand for Parliament (with the exception of Aboriginal women in some States) – yet, there are only 28.3% women in Federal Parliament.

This document provides an overview of Democrat policy initiatives for women -- of all ages and backgrounds -- in Australia. We have identified several key areas of concern affecting women today, and while they do not reflect the entirety of issues that affect women's and girls' daily lives, they provide an outline of the areas of women's policy that are in need of drastic reform.



Key Initiatives:

The Democrats believe that government, business and society have a responsibility to identify solutions and a reform agenda for greater choice, gender equity and work and family balance; and the Democrats women's policy is an important first step.

We need:

- debate and enactment of the *Workplace Relations (Guaranteeing Paid Maternity Leave) Amendment Bill 2007* calling for a national 14-week government-funded paid maternity leave scheme;
- the creation of a Work and Family Act and a Commissioner to monitor the importance of work and family practices in the workplace;
- the development of programs by government and business in consultation with the Australian Breastfeeding Association, to educate workplaces to encourage breastfeeding;
- a national review of pay equity in Australia by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission;
- a national body within the Department of Health and Ageing dedicated to improving the health of all women and girls;
- a national health plan for Indigenous mothers and babies;
- enactment of the cross-party Pregnancy Counselling (Truth in Advertising) Bill 2006;
- national access to the abortion drug, mifepristone (RU486);
- a national inquiry into the effects of the media on

the body image of young women and girls;

- Move the Office of the Status of Women into PM&C, with cross-Government authority;
- Implement a women's impact statement on all legislation; to ensure that the rights of women are adequately addressed;
- Re-implement an annual women's Budget statement; and
- an additional \$20 million to be set aside to further develop and support national anti-violence public awareness and education campaigns and programs

Improving women's general + reproductive health

Throughout their lives women's and men's experiences of health and illness and of the health care system are different, due to both biological factors and gender roles. Health policy and health services need to acknowledge these differences.

Access to reproductive health care saves women's lives and allows women to delay childbearing so that they can complete their education, participate in the workforce and acquire skills and experience if they choose.

General Health: Issues

Women live longer than men and make greater use of health care services across their lifespan. Heart diseases, stroke, dementia and breast cancer are the leading causes of death for women, and 1 in 4 Australian women suffer domestic violence. This is the biggest cause of health problems for young and middle-aged women.

The National Women's Health Policy, and its associated program launched in 1989 - brought women's health to the forefront in Australia. It was abandoned as a distinct policy entity in the late 1990s and as a consequence the health needs of women became less of a priority. Removing specific reference to women's health in the public health funding agreements between the Commonwealth Government and the States several years ago signalled a further downgrading of women's specific health needs.

Action:

- a new National Women's Health Policy dedicated to improving the health of all women and girls;
- lobby the Government to provide through the TGA, information and advice for Daughters of DES (the anti-miscarriage drug prescribed between 1946 and 1971);
- improve home and community care services for older people living in their own homes and sufficient funding for residential aged care to meet the need for quality care in quality buildings;
- more training for GPs in women's health issues; and
- improved involvement of women in decision-making, particularly Indigenous, disabled and culturally and linguistically diverse women.

Improving reproductive health: Issues

According to SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support group) each year in Australia approximately 58,000 couples experience reproductive loss: About 55,000 experience early pregnancy loss, 1,750 babies are stillborn and about 900 babies die in the first twenty-eight days after birth.

Increases in sexual abuse and violence and sexually transmitted disease, high rates of infertility, high levels of ignorance about sexual and reproductive health amongst young people and relatively high numbers of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, in combination with increasing caesarean rates, restricted access to midwives, too few maternity supports and high levels of post-natal depression suggest that much still needs to be done to improve sexual and reproductive health.

The Democrats have long-fought to protect women's reproductive rights and led the fight for access to RU486 as an alternative to surgical abortion, and for transparency in advertising of pregnancy counselling services.

Action:

- additional funding for services that provide support for women that miscarry, such as SANDS (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support group);
- guarantee a full range of safe, affordable contraception on demand, including over the counter access to the oral contraceptive pill, placement of all forms of contraception on the PBS, and ready access to low cost condoms and emergency contraception in schools;

- implement national public education campaigns on emergency contraception and preconception health;
- support national access to the abortion drug, mifepristone (RU486);
- introduce uniform national guidelines for routine antenatal care for all antenatal providers;
- push for the introduction of a National Maternity Action Plan to give all pregnant women greater choice in where and how they give birth, including the option of publicly funded midwifery services throughout pregnancy and childbirth with a single caregiver throughout the process;
- introduce a national home visitor program for families with a new baby offering a range of services to supplement those of midwives and maternal and child health nurses;
- support research into screening for ovarian cancer;
- significantly increase the percentage of Australia's overseas aid directed at sexual and reproductive health to at least 10% of the overall aid budget to support universal access to sexual and reproductive health services including:
 - comprehensive sexuality education and access to contraception;
 - safe abortion and post-abortion care;
 - skilled birth attendants at all deliveries and access to emergency obstetric care;
- specialised services to treat obstetric fistula and end female genital mutilation.
- end the current ban on AusAID funding being used to train overseas health workers in abortion techniques; and
- support the establishment of a new fully-fledged UN women's agency, with on-the-ground presence in every country, with a full complement of expert staff and targeted programmes.

Pregnancy counselling: Issues

The Australian Democrats have led the debate for all pregnancy counselling services, whether they are anti-choice or pro-choice, to be upfront and truthful in their advertising. In 2005, Senator Stott Despoja introduced the *Transparent Advertising and Notification of Pregnancy Counselling Services Bill 2005*, which would make pregnancy counselling services subject to the same misleading advertising laws as organisations engaged in trade or commerce.

This bill, reintroduced as a cross-party bill in December last year, would put Australia at the forefront of women's rights, highlighting the commitment to not only transparency in advertising, but also the regulation of pregnancy counselling services.¹

A recent survey commissioned by Marie Stopes International¹ found 81% of women believe that a pregnancy counsellor should refer for all three options: adoption, abortion and parenting.

The need for regulation in this area is even more pressing given the hundreds of women that have contacted the Democrats over the years to share their experiences. Women have said that they have felt bullied and pressured into continuing their pregnancies, that they have been offered baby clothes and assistance in that form and through government funding if they decide not to proceed with a termination of pregnancy.

Action:

- enactment of the cross-party *Pregnancy Counselling (Truth in Advertising) Bill 2006* to ensure that women facing an unplanned pregnancy will not be misled or deceived when contacting pregnancy counselling services; and,
- lobby the government to implement a federally funded pro-choice 24-hour pregnancy counselling service.

Balancing work and life

The Australian Democrats recognise the growing pressure felt by Australians who have family responsibilities, whether they are raising children or caring for someone with a disability, frailty or mental illness. Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that many workplaces do not make balancing work and family life easier. Instead, many people feel that it is getting harder.³

The Democrats recognise the need to implement flexible work practices in workplaces that are friendlier to families; improve the security and conditions of part-time and casual

work; and assist working families on the birth of children and with the ongoing demands of care of children and the elderly.

The Federal Government needs to commit to a suite of reforms to make a real difference to the lives of working parents, and legislating on paid maternity leave and ensuring access to affordable, quality childcare is a start. (Please refer to our childcare policy document for further information.)



Paid Maternity Leave: Issues:

PML is a better scheme for working women than the Government's Baby Bonus.

The Baby Bonus is a one-off financial boost that does nothing to encourage workplace attachment, or allow for superannuation payments to continue throughout the period of leave.

The low workforce participation rate of Australian women in the childbearing age group, (72.4%) is the 8th lowest in the OECD, (trailing well behind Sweden at 86.4%), highlighting the need for a suite of reforms to the Government's work and family policies to encourage and embrace women's labour force participation.

Research conducted by the *Work and Family Roundtable* in July 2007, proves just how far behind Australia is compared to other OECD nations, when it comes to basic workplace entitlements. Countries such as New Zealand and the UK are steaming ahead, with a PML system where taxpayers, through government payments, provide a basic period of paid leave that also allows for employer top-ups.

Action:

² What women want when faced with an unplanned pregnancy Marie Stopes International, November 2006

³ Benchmarks: Work and Family Policies in Election 2007, Work and Family Policy Roundtable.

¹ In December 2006, Senator Stott Despoja, along with Senators Nettle, Brown and Troeth introduced the cross-party *Pregnancy Counselling (Truth in Advertising) Bill 2006* to regulate pregnancy counselling services to prevent misleading and deceptive advertising or notification of pregnancy counselling services.

- the Democrats re-introduced legislation on September 13⁴, calling for a national 14-week government-funded paid maternity leave scheme, to take into account changes to Australia's industrial relations laws;

Our costings⁵ indicate the proposal contained in this Bill would cost in the vicinity of \$591.6 million in the first year of operation, not including offsets from Family Tax Benefit A and B and childcare.⁶ This assumes that the payment is taxable and that women who receive this new payment will remain eligible for the existing Baby Bonus and Maternity Immunisation Allowance with estimated costs to the government of \$1.3 billion and the Maternity Immunisation Allowance of \$59.3 million respectively in 2007-08⁷.

- debate and enactment of the Workplace Relations (Guaranteeing Paid Maternity Leave) Amendment Bill 2007; and,
- research work and family policy challenges currently facing Australia.

Work and Family: Issues

A recent Relationships Forum Australia study, an unexpected tragedy⁸, highlighted that Australia has now become the only high-income country in the world that combines very long average working hours with large amounts of work at unsocial times – weeknights and weekends.

This underlines the increasing importance of making it easier for working women and men (and their families) to better balance their work and care responsibilities.

Action:

- creation of a Work and Family Act and a Commissioner to monitor and promote through the Act the importance of work and family practices in the workplace;
- introduce the right for women with children to have

access to flexible working hours; and the right to return to work part-time;

- allow long term casuals (minimum 12 months service) to either convert to permanent work, or if they remain casual, have access to paid leave;
- prevent employers discriminating against carers in the pre-work and work area; and,
- improve community awareness of existing anti-discrimination laws.

Domestic and sexual violence

Women's safety: Issues

The Democrats are committed to programs that assist community and women's services, as well as collaborative efforts between State and Federal governments, to prevent, educate, intervene and assist with recovery from violence.

In 2002–03, Access Economics estimated the total cost of partner violence in Australia (using a broad definition that included emotional and social abuse, and financial deprivation) to be \$8.1 billion, including a \$3.5 billion estimate of pain, suffering and premature death.⁹

In 2005, an estimated 1.3 million Australian women had experienced partner violence: 17% of all women. Of the 74 intimate partner homicides in 2005-06, four out of five involved a male offender killing his female partner.¹⁰

The current response to violence against women is the Government funded Violence Against Women, Australia Says No campaign, which at the end of the day, just tells women to call a number. We need more than just a national 24-hour phone number to combat domestic violence in Australia. We need a national, integrated, long-term approach consisting of key education and prevention programs; substantial financial assistance; and the recognition of domestic violence

⁴ *Workplace Relations (Guaranteeing Paid Maternity Leave) Amendment Bill 2007*

⁵ *Workplace Relations (Guaranteeing Paid Maternity Leave) Amendment Bill 2007 Explanatory Memorandum September 2007*

⁶ *HREOC costed a similar model of PML in A Time To Value (which essentially mirrored my original 2002 bill and our costings) at \$219 million for last financial year, including the Family Tax Benefit and childcare costs offsets, highlighting the savings to the government.*

⁷ Budget Estimate for 2007-08 from the Australian Government, Portfolio Budget Statements 2007-08: Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Portfolio, p. 53.

⁸ An Unexpected Tragedy: Evidence for the connection between working hours and family breakdown in Australia Relationship Forum Australia 2007

⁹ Access Economics 2004, *The Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy: Part I*, Office of the Status of Women, Canberra, viewed 25 September 2006,

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics 4102.0 - *Australian Social Trends*, 'Women's experience of partner violence' 2007

in federal legislation to combat violence against women in this country.

The Violence Against Women, Australia Says No campaign was announced in the 2005 Budget by the Australian Government, under the new Women's Safety Agenda program, which has a funding program of \$75.7 million over four years.



Action:

- an additional \$20 million should be set aside to further develop and support national anti-violence public awareness and education campaigns and programs, which would be achieved through:
 - educational programs aimed to ensure school children and adolescents and informed about violence and its prevention – including, where appropriate, sexual violence and 'date rape';
 - development of workplace programs by government and business that raise awareness of the impact of domestic violence on women workers and the workplace;
- increase federal funding for 'Crisis Accommodation' such as shelters and refuges through a comprehensive housing policy and the provision of adequate emergency housing;
- extend intervention and prevention programs involving cooperative efforts between courts,

- police, schools, health and women's services;
- ensure women and children who leave a violent partner do not lose their homes, their jobs, or their entitlements to Centrelink benefits;
- ensure any future domestic violence initiatives are developed in consultation with key community groups and Commonwealth, State and Territory government representatives in order to maximise the effectiveness of policy;
- guarantee Government funding of White Ribbon Day, the United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women; and,
- encourage the Australian Government to recognise women's contribution and remove direct and indirect discrimination, which includes signing the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Indigenous women and children

The Australian Democrats have consistently called on the Federal Government to make a responsible and appropriate response to domestic violence, and while we agree that this should be dealt with as a matter of urgency, there should be thorough community consultation, cultural sensitivity, and long-term funding commitment across all sections of the community.

Health: Issues

ABS information as at 2001 indicates that the average life expectancy of an Indigenous Australian female was estimated to be 17 years behind the Australian average, which at best would place the life expectancy of an Indigenous female to be 65 years.¹¹

While mainstream Australia enjoys access to the highest level of medical services and health care, the average Indigenous Australian female is more on par with our South

¹¹ Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2007, Commonwealth of Australia, Melbourne, p. 3.2.

¹² AMA. Lifting the Weight. Low birth weight babies: An Indigenous health burden that must be lifted. AMA report card 2005

Pacific neighbours, such as Timor-Leste (62), Solomon Islands (64), Kiribati (67) and Papua New Guinea (60). These are all countries that have been deprived of basic public services through fragile governments, struggling economies and civil conflict.



Action:

- a national health plan for Aboriginal mothers and babies and programs with a prevention focus such as outreach antenatal services, home visiting programs and community-based childcare and playgroups *According to the AMA, additional funding for culturally appropriate maternal and child health programs within Indigenous communities is estimated to be an additional \$20 million per annum (not including set-up costs.)*¹²
- improving access for Indigenous women to culturally appropriate primary healthcare could be achieved through:
 - increased number of health practitioners working within Indigenous health settings;
 - increased number of trained Indigenous health practitioners;
 - increased training of the Indigenous health sector, including linguistic training for health workers in Indigenous communities;
 - access to health / educational information and material in Indigenous languages; and,
 - long term commitments to fund health improvement plans - short-term responses are not the answer;
- at a minimum, Federal, State and Territory leaders should commit to a time frame for achieving health equality for *all* Indigenous Australians;

Abuse: Issues

¹³ Women's Experiences of Male Violence: Findings from the Australian Component of the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS) p.29-31 <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/56/RPP56.pdf>

According to the 2002-2003 Australian component of the International Violence Against Women Survey (IVAWS), 20 per cent of Indigenous women experienced physical or threatened violence compared with 7 per cent of non-Indigenous women.¹³

Family and community violence problems are complex. They are intertwined with other health issues, socioeconomic and environmental conditions. Issues relating to alcohol and substance abuse have contributed to violence in indigenous communities.

Action:

- governments must work in partnership with the Indigenous population and communities, to identify and implement measures to address family related violence and abuse. Indigenous consultation is key to establishing appropriate supports for Indigenous women and children;
- support the role of women in community leadership in addressing issues including family violence and child abuse;
- increase Indigenous housing and accommodation;
- appropriate access to shelters and refuges. While this is an important component in any domestic violence situation, access to emergency accommodation is limited in many remote Indigenous communities; and,
- establish a national inquiry addressing the underlying causes of violence and abuse (i.e.: alcohol and substance abuse, generational disadvantage, poverty, poor health care and unemployment)

Women and inequality

Themes such as a lack of promotion because of marriage or motherhood, the tyranny of workplaces which are not family friendly, the absence of support networks and the critical mass women need for cultural change, and the emphasis of appearance over performance are all too common barriers presented to women in professional life.

¹⁴ *Women now earn \$100 a week less than men: ACTU analysis shows widening gender pay gap* ACTU March 2007 <http://www.actu.asn.au/Media/Mediareleases/Womennowearn100aweeklessthanmenACTUanalysisshowswideninggenderpaygap.aspx>

¹⁵ *Women and Work Choices: Impacts on the Low Pay Sector Report* August 2007 ((Centre for Work + Life: University of South Australia)

The Democrats have been at the forefront of calls to implement measures at the national level, to reduce gender based discrimination in the workplace.

Pay equity: Issues

Gender inequity in the workplace is an issue that is becoming more apparent and the fact that Australia is trailing other comparable economies in this area is proof of just how far behind we are when it comes to women's rights.

Women formally achieved the right to equal pay in 1972, but in reality it seems to be moving further out of reach.

An ACTU analysis based on 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show full-time female workers earned on average 10 per cent less than men: around \$100 less per week.¹⁴



The launch of the *Women and WorkChoices: Impacts on the low pay sector*¹⁵ report in August this year clearly proved that WorkChoices is having a detrimental affect on low paid women and their families.

Action:

- a national review of pay equity in Australia by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission; and,
- a national plan of action within which women's fundamental right to equal opportunity and equal citizenship is acknowledged and promoted.

Women and WorkChoices: Issues

Women in low wage jobs are significantly worse off under new federal industrial relations laws, receiving lower pay and penalty rates and having less job security, according to the *Women and WorkChoices* Report released in August.

The Democrats believe that WorkChoices is unfair and has to go. Australia must have a workable industrial relations plan

¹⁶ Australia @ Work: The benchmark report September 2007 (Workplace Research Centre: University of NSW)

and a single unitary system that is fair, balanced and productive.

According to research conducted by the ACTU, women on AWAs are earning on average, \$87 less per week than their counterparts on collective agreements, and for part-time women, the difference can be as much as \$140 per week.¹⁶

The Democrats will:

- abolish AWAs;
- provide for a genuine safety net, and a mix of statutory individual and collective agreements; and,
- re-introduce unfair dismissal laws with low cost, non-legalistic and prompt resolution of disputes, including a process to weed out vexatious and frivolous claims.

Superannuation: Issues

Women fall behind on superannuation compared to men because they are more likely to work part-time and have time out of the workforce to raise children or care for ageing parents.

Action:

- the Federal Government needs to increase the awareness of schemes/options that are currently available, like the spouse contribution, splitting superannuation benefits at divorce, co-contribution and advice services that may benefit women (like the National Information Centre for Retirement Investments); and,
- special attention needs to be paid to indigenous women's needs in this area. Areas of disadvantage like limited life assurance cover need to be addressed. Greater use of their existing networks and organizations could be made to enhance community awareness, not only about superannuation but also the importance of financial management issues like having a will.

Breastfeeding: Issues:

The Australian Democrats have been at the forefront of calls for the right of women to breastfeed in public, including the workplace.

In 2003 Senator Stott Despoja successfully changed the Senate standing orders to allow breastfeeding if necessary. She has also moved amendments to outlaw discrimination

against women breastfeeding in public, introduce more workplace supports for breastfeeding women, including breastfeeding breaks, and to remove the GST from lactation devices.

While we commend the Federal Government for injecting \$8.7 million over four years to raise awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding, more needs to be done to ensure that workplaces are made 'breastfeeding' friendly, to ensure that women do not face post-pregnancy discrimination.

Action:

- fund programs in addition to the ABA that encourage breastfeeding, including education programs, and the coordination of these programs;
- provide facilities suitable for breastfeeding or expressing milk in the workplace; and,
- lobby the government to recognise women's contribution and remove direct and indirect discrimination, which includes signing the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which would protect women from all forms of pregnancy related discrimination in the workplace.

Women in Leadership

Issues

It is vital we see an effective voice for women in Government and the community.

According to the Australian Financial Review Boss Magazine, of the 25 top companies in Australia, less than half have a woman on the top executive teams, with only four females making it as chief executives in the ASX 200.

The fact that Australia is trailing other comparable economies in the area of gender equity should be a wake up call to business, industry and government.



Australia is now 16th in the world when it come to women in senior business positions, after falling seven places from 2004, well behind the number one, the Philippines, where 97 per cent of businesses have women in senior management.¹⁷ We were one of only seven countries that has reported a fall in the number of businesses that have women in senior executive positions.

Action:

- a well-resourced national funding program for women's organisations, including specific support for young women's organisations;
- implement a women's impact statement on all legislation; to ensure that the rights of women are adequately addressed;
- implement family friendly practices at the State/Federal level, such as the provision of child-care, which will enable women with family responsibilities to more easily hold public office;
- move the Office for Women into PM&C, to better enhance a strong and effective Office for Women, with cross Government authority; and,
- implement a women's Budget statement.

¹⁷ Grant Thornton International Business Report 2007 'Women in Business' <http://www.grantthornton.com.au/UserFiles/File/Publications/research/International%20business%20report%202007.pdf>



Other Issues:

Women with disabilities: Issues

The Democrats propose greater commitment to promoting leadership opportunities for women with disabilities, and fostering the empowerment and participation of all women with disabilities.

Women with disabilities are less likely to be in paid work than other women, men with disabilities or the population as a whole. Men with disabilities are almost twice as likely to have jobs than women with disabilities.

It is essential that women with disabilities are afforded the opportunity to learn leadership skills so they can represent the views of women with disabilities and also pass on those skills to other women.

Action:

- establish further programs highlighting Violence Against Women With Disabilities, and ways to combat this;
- enact legislation preventing sterilisation of women and girls with disabilities;
- increase supports for carers, who are predominately women; and,
- encourage Australia's commitment to the binding United Nations Convention for People with Disabilities;

Young women:

Young women face particular social, cultural, economic and political barriers to the full exploration of these choices that prevent them from achieving their full potential.

Women aged between 18 and 31, known as Generation Y, are better qualified than men their own age but are earning

between \$34 and \$135 a week less, according to a report from the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling.

Action:

- establish a national inquiry into the effects of the media on the body image of young women and girls;
- promote education for women around financial awareness and economic independence, particularly focussing on young women;
- provide programs promoting personal and social growth and increasing young women's skills in controlling their experiences and utilising opportunities; and,
- increase support for accessible sexual assault support services to young people.