



Australian Federation of Graduate Women Inc.

PO Box 224, Enmore NSW 2042

www.afgw.org.au

The Hon Julia Gillard MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

The Hon Julie Collins MP
Parliamentary Secretary for Community Services
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

25 April 2012

Dear Prime Minister Gillard and Minister Collins

56TH SESSION OF THE UN COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

The Australian Federation of Graduate Women (AFGW) writes to congratulate the Australian Government Office for Women (OFW) for its tremendous efforts towards promoting the empowerment of women, including rural women, through education and training. Australia's paper presented at the recent 56th session of the United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York¹ constitutes an important 'on-the-record' statement to the world and reflects AFGW's position in relation to the need to eliminate barriers faced by rural women in order to assist them to secure opportunities for their future.

At the same time, AFGW writes to express some concerns it has with the 56th session and future sessions regarding the apparent reliance by certain member States on 'traditional' or 'moral' values which have the effect of denying women their fundamental rights and freedoms. AFGW is disappointed to have learnt that it was the invocation of such values which lead to CSW failing to adopt Agreed Conclusions.

Whilst AFGW respects the rights of member States as independent and sovereign nations and appreciates that the rights to freedom from discrimination and of thought, conscience and religion are non-derogable, AFGW considers it abhorrent that certain member States continue to condone or rely upon certain 'traditional' or 'moral' values to deny women their sexual and reproductive health rights.

A woman's rights to sexual and reproductive health are essential for her ability independently to determine her future. They are fundamental to her ability to enjoy all rights and for achieving gender equality and economic development.

AFGW disapproves of the adoption of laws and practices by member States which condone, amongst other things, violence against women (which can include acid attacks on women and marital beating²), early or forced marriages, marital rape, female genital mutilation, son preference, 'corrective' violence (which can include raping women based on 'traditional' views that women are 'objects' for curing disease such as HIV AIDS³), and rape and sexual assault of bisexual, lesbian, transgender and intersexed persons.⁴

¹ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw56/general-discussions/member-states/Australia.pdf>.

² See 'Human Rights Council Advisory Committee - A focus on traditional values and the universality of human rights' in Human Rights Monitor Quarterly, International Service for Human Rights, Issue 4/2011, pages 7 - 9).

³ Ibid.

Given that the focus of the 57th session of the UN CSW will be violence against women, AFGW calls on the Australian Government to take a firm stance in relation to the rights of women to sexual and reproductive health by way of leadership through positive example, and by education⁵ and continuing international dialogue. This includes reaffirming the need to protect, respect and secure the rights health and human rights of women and girls at the upcoming Commission on Population and Development and the International Conference on Sustainable Development (i.e., 'Rio+20'), and by openly and vocally recognising and supporting the important role that women's groups and organisations play in the context of those challenges faced by women towards their own advancement. (This includes the important and influential role that individual women and organisations have played in challenging traditional and archaic values and practices which impinge on universal human rights laws and standards).

AFGW reminds the Government that under the UN Charter (**Charter**) gender equality is a fundamental human right. We ask the Government to remind all UN member States that by virtue of their membership in the UN community they have accepted that "the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and individual part of universal human rights". To that end, AFGW urges that real efforts be made by the international community towards resolving contested views regarding traditional values, women and human rights prior to the next CSW session. This is important for ensuring that CSW can continue remain an effective and influential platform for securing human dignity and freedom for women and for ensuring that member States observe their responsibilities (including to stem practices which adversely impact on the health of women and girls) in the future.

Yours faithfully

Dr Jane Baker

Ms Lily Tsen

President

Convener for Human Rights

Email: jane.baker1@optusnet.com.au

Email: lily_tsen@yahoo.com.au

Cc Ms Penny Williams
Australian Global Ambassador for Women and Girls
Dept of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
R.G.Casey Building
John McEwan Crescent
Barton
ACT 0221

⁴ Similarly, AFGW expresses its concern with those member States whose laws fail to recognise marital rape.

⁵ Australia could, for instance, play a role in educating women that sexually violent conduct with someone a woman knows can constitute rape (which the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women has noted is commonly misunderstood in South Africa and in need of public education around the issue. See 'Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women' in Human Rights Monitor Quarterly, International Service for Human Rights, Issue 2/4 2011, pages 14 - 17).