

Mr Greg Manning
Assistant Secretary
International Security and Human Rights Branch
Office of International Law
Attorney-General's Department
Robert Garran Offices, National Circuit
BARTON ACT 2600

13 June 2008

Dear Mr Manning,

We are writing on behalf of members of the four federal women's secretariats and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants at the recent joint secretariat meeting in Broken Hill, to express our support for accession to the Optional Protocol to CEDAW. Members of the secretariats strongly support accession to the Optional Protocol for four key reasons.

Firstly, acceding to the Optional Protocol for CEDAW is an important step towards strengthening women's human rights in Australia. Accession to the Optional Protocol is not only a symbolic statement of women's rights, but a substantive realisation of the government's commitments to women's human rights. Although we recognise that there are many mechanisms already in existence in Australia, we feel that this is an additional opportunity for the Australian Government to receive feedback on complaints which have not been resolved domestically.

Secondly, members of the secretariats believe that it is essential that women's rights should be classified with the same value as other human rights. The Optional Protocol to CEDAW is the first gender specific international complaints procedure mechanism. Australia already allows individuals and groups to make complaints directly to the United Nations under the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. As well as putting CEDAW on a par with other human rights treaties which have complaints procedures in place, accession to the Optional Protocol to CEDAW would enhance existing mechanisms by specifically incorporating practices and procedures that have been developed under other complaints procedures.

Thirdly, the four women's secretariats acknowledge and support Australia's reengagement and reaffirmed commitment to international development in our region. In addition to our domestic responsibilities to women's human rights, Australia is increasingly called upon to be a leader in the Pacific. Currently, only the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu are parties to the Optional Protocol to CEDAW and we believe that Australia will be empowered to advocate for accession to the Optional Protocol amongst member states in the region when it has itself acceded to it.

Finally, both the NGO sector and the Office of Women acknowledge the importance of raising public awareness about CEDAW. Acceding to the Optional Protocol allows for this to happen in a structured and meaningful way.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our initial feedback on why the Government should accede to the Optional Protocol to CEDAW. Members of the four women's secretariats would welcome the opportunity to consult more widely in the coming months and look forward to the government's response.

Yours Sincerely,

Members of the National Women's Secretariats