Senator the Hon Marise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women, Australian Government

Statement for the General Discussion of the 66th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, as delivered by pre-recorded video

This 66th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women focuses the world’s attention on the importance of achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programs.

Australians are familiar with the challenges of natural hazards, such as floods, droughts, bushfires and cyclones. We have made disaster risk reduction a priority domestically and across our region. We know that prevention, preparedness, response, recovery and reconstruction efforts are more effective when the people making decisions and taking action are representative of all parts of the community.

As I speak to you from Australia, we have recently experienced some of the worst flooding in our history in the east of the country. In these difficult times, women have played key leadership roles to drive the integrated response to this disaster, including the Commonwealth Minister for Emergency Management Bridget McKenzie, Minister for Government Services Linda Reynolds and the police commissioners of the two states affected, Katarina Carroll in Queensland and Karen Webb in New South Wales. Women in our communities have shown great resilience in the face of disaster, volunteering to support the response and recovery efforts and bringing their communities together.

Through Australia’s international development program, we are also supporting women to play a leading role in disaster preparedness and response across the Pacific. Our Women’s Resilience to Disasters Program in the Pacific harnesses the capability of women, by supporting their leadership, and by working towards gender equality in disaster risk reduction efforts. The program empowers Pacific women to lead Pacific solutions to prevent, prepare for and recover from disasters. For example, we support women in Fiji to map churches and other buildings as evacuation centres, to train as volunteers and to implement child protection initiatives.

Where inequalities exist, they are exacerbated by disasters. Women and girls are disproportionately affected when crises occur. The data tells us there is a significant increase in the incidence of sexual and gender based violence; child, early and forced marriage; and other harmful practices in crisis situations. We are continually improving how we prepare for the needs of women and girls in crises. For example we are providing training to Red Cross workers, emergency services volunteers and health workers to better help women and girls who are experiencing domestic violence during disasters and recovery.
In our Pacific region, following the volcano and tsunami in Tonga in January this year, the Australian Defence Force delivered critical supplies including sanitation kits with soap, hygiene products and underwear for women and girls.

Governments and communities are getting better at responding to the needs of women and girls in crisis situations, but there is more we can learn and more we can do.

Data on the impacts of disasters empowers us to transform the way we react to disasters. For example, 96 per cent of the deaths in the Solomon Islands flash flood in 2014 were women and children, such information is sobering and tragic but vital to improving our response.

At the global level there are still significant gaps in gender-disaggregated data that could tell us how disasters impact on women and men, girls and boys, differently. This lack of information hampers efforts to build resilience and respond better to crises.

Australia continues to advocate to end all forms of gender-based violence and inequality. The safety and equality of women and girls is a fundamental human right. Australia is also committed to ensuring sexual and reproductive health rights. Women’s autonomy is crucial to their meaningful participation in all areas of society.

Individually and together, we must ensure women play a leadership role in tackling climate change and building resilience, including by implementing gender-responsive policies and programs.

I look forward to a time when we can all meet in person again to discuss progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women. Thank you.

ENDS