UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY
14 October 2013

Third Committee

Advancement of Women

Statement by Ms Tanisha Hewanpola, First Secretary
Permanent Mission of Australia to the United Nations

(Check against delivery)

Thank you Mr Chair,

Eighteen years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action were agreed to, it remains clear that the advancement of women must be at the forefront of our global efforts to promote human rights, progress sustainable development, and maintain international peace and security.

Today, the situation in Syria continues to worsen, with the civilian population subject to extrajudicial killing, torture, and horrific violations of their rights. But this conflict, like so many other crises, has also been marked by the horrific targeting of women and girls, particularly through the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, as well as forced displacement, early and forced marriage, and exploitation.
The gender-dimensions of this conflict require our immediate attention. Every 15 seconds a Syrian refugee is created. Of the more than two million Syrian refugees registered in neighbouring countries, 78 per cent are women and children; 25 per cent are of child bearing age; and five per cent are pregnant.

The Security Council’s women, peace and security agenda remains highly relevant, and concerted efforts must be made to implement it effectively. The treatment of women in conflict settings is an international peace and security issue. And women’s contribution to conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding is fundamental to achieving lasting peace. Further efforts must also be made to ensure women’s vital contributions as agents of peace and security, are harnessed. Women’s voices must be heard, including in our discussions on Syria.

As a member of the Security Council, Australia has been working to strengthen the Council’s engagement on the women, peace and security agenda across the breadth of its work. To complement this, we have held an Arria formula meeting on gender practitioners in peacekeeping operations, as well as panel discussions women’s participation in peacebuilding, and on conflict-related violence and the impact of unregulated arms flow to women and girls in the DRC.

Mr Chair

Preventing the pervasive use of sexual violence as a tactic of conflict must be at the centre of our international peace and security efforts. Australia is pleased to champion the UK’s Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict
Initiative, and is committed to raising awareness of the prevalence of sexual violence in conflict; to ending impunity; to providing comprehensive services to survivors and their families; and to supporting national prevention and response capacity-building efforts. In this regard, we also applaud the adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty and the contribution it will make to reducing violence perpetrated against women and girls, which is fundamental to achieving women’s empowerment and gender equality.

Gender inequality and gender based violence is of course not limited to women in conflict situations. It is widespread and pervasive, with profound personal, social and economic impacts. One in three Australian women report having experienced physical violence, and almost one in five reports having experienced sexual violence from the age of 15.

Mr Chair, the implementation of the Agreed Conclusions from the 57th session of the Commission for the Status of Women, with its focus on violence against women, is critical.

At home, Australia is working through our National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children to address this. We have established dedicated institutions to implement the plan, with our new ‘Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children’ aimed at changing attitudes. These efforts complement our National Centre of Excellence, which is building a strong and sustainable knowledge base to drive reform on reducing violence against women and their children.
Australia is committed to the realisation of the Millennium Development Goals, and recognises that gender equality is central to their achievement. Supporting women's full economic, social and political participation is key to reducing poverty, enhancing economic growth and democratic governance, and increasing the well-being of women, girls, their families and communities.

Australia's aid program is supporting this as a priority. Globally, we invest in women and girls' health, education, training and leadership, and assist them to enter into business, and to access credit and markets. We focus on women and girls across all policy areas. Australia's education programs include measures to increase girls' enrolment; we support women's access to justice, and promote their appointment to decision-making positions; our agricultural programs improve women's skills to increase productivity.

As the International Conference on Population and Development approaches its twenty year review, more must be done to address women's lack of basic sexual and reproductive health and rights globally, including access to comprehensive reproductive and sexual health services; safe, effective and affordable family planning; and comprehensive sexuality education.

The full and effective participation of women benefits us all. But to achieve this, we must recognise and remove the barriers that prevent it. Race, ethnicity, age, religion, disability, socio-economic status, geographic location, and sexual orientation can compound disadvantage, and specific efforts must be made to address this.
Domestically, Australia is working to ensure women with disabilities are also able to access opportunities. Our National Disability Insurance Scheme will ensure that women with permanent and significant disabilities receive high-quality, individualised support over their lifetimes, including help to meet the additional costs associated with having disabilities, which will enable them to engage more fully in the community and economy.

Australia recognises that women’s participation in the workforce is critical to their economic empowerment. To support Australian women’s participation and retention in the workforce, Australia is introducing a new initiative whereby parental leave will be treated as a workplace entitlement. Through the paid parental leave scheme, six months leave will be provided at replacement wages. To address the particular challenges faced by women in regional, rural and remote areas, Australia has introduced programs to improve digital literacy, which will aid their access to services; provide business and employment opportunities; and help rural women to overcome physical and social isolation.

Mr Chair, Australia’s approach to the advancement of women is based on the fundamental principle articulated at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, that “women’s rights are human rights, and human rights are women’s rights”. While tangible progress has been made worldwide since the Beijing Conference to improve the lives of women and girls, critical goals remain unrealised, and women and girls continue to bear the brunt of this disadvantage. Protecting and promoting women’s rights is fundamental – from conflict settings to classrooms, from workplaces to boardrooms – we must ensure greater focus and attention is given to make gender equality and the advancement of women a reality.