

Welcome Remarks

Opening address to Women's Economic Empowerment Event (check against delivery)

**Ambassador for Women and Girls
24 August, 2015, Mahe, Seychelles**

(900 words)

Acknowledgements

Thank you Meg.

Your Excellency, Dr Erna Athanasius, Ambassador for Women and Children

Graham Anderson, Director at the Indian Ocean Rim Association Secretariat

Ladies and gentlemen from across the wonderfully dynamic and diverse region which is the Indian Ocean Rim.

What a great pleasure to be gathering in Seychelles to build on the important efforts underway in IORA, at regional and national levels, to increase women's economic participation.

I thank Your Excellency for the warm welcome to all of us by the Government of Seychelles. I am especially delighted to be working to promote women's economic empowerment with another member of the small band of international ambassadors for gender equality.

Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, has asked me to convey her regret that she is not able to join us.

I know the Minister is disappointed that other commitments have prevented her participation, but her enthusiasm for this agenda, as we have seen from her message, is heartfelt, and it has been evident since Australia became IORA Chair in 2013.

Working with our IORA partners, the Australian Government is pleased to be sponsoring this dialogue, to continue the momentum established at the first event we hosted in Kuala Lumpur in 2014.

We have championed women's economic participation with friends across IORA because it is the right thing to do. But as Minister Bishop said at a business event in the margins of the IORA Ministerial Meeting in Perth last year, it is also the smart thing to do.

This view was highlighted in the 2014 IORA Economic Declaration, which stated that 'the prosperity of the region will only be realised fully by investing in the empowerment of women'.

Hurdles to women's full economic participation hold us all back - both women and men. The UN estimates the Asia-Pacific loses \$89 billion each year by limiting women's participation in the workforce.

Conversely, women's economic empowerment drives sustainable growth.

The Economist magazine has noted that the increase in employment of women in developed countries, during the past decade, has added more to global growth than has the economic emergence of China.

In India, the states with the highest percentage of women in the labour force are growing the fastest and have the largest declines in poverty.

Evidence such as this sits beneath an ambitious target set by the G20 last year, to reduce the gap in employment participation rates between men and women in G20 countries by 25 per cent by 2025.

IORA, too, has recognised that women are a powerful and often untapped economic force. So in our region there has been a dramatic and welcome focus on women's employment participation.

The Indian Ocean Rim is a region of immense diversity – in terms of culture, religion, economic fundamentals and historical experiences – and this difference informs how we approach women's empowerment. (The magnitude of diversity among our countries will not be lost on me this week, travelling from Australia to Seychelles to Kenya in the course of five days.)

But for all this difference, we have something critical in common: Without exception, we all stand to benefit enormously from the increased economic participation of our women; and, as is clear from a report we are launching today, we all face similar hurdles to achieving this.

Responding to a gap in knowledge identified at the event in Kuala Lumpur last year, Australia, UN Women and the IORA Secretariat have joined forces to develop the report, *Enabling Women's Contributions to the Indian Ocean Rim Economies*.

It is a baseline of data and information on gender equality and women's economic empowerment in our countries, against which progress can be measured.

I look forward to a discussion about the report later today. The report will be a useful advocacy tool for all of us in our individual countries as we call for stronger national commitments to women's economic participation.

Likewise, the Mahe Consensus on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment, which we will discuss over the next two days, has the potential to be transformative.

It represents a strong platform from which to urge the forthcoming IORA Council of Ministers Meeting to secure gender equality in IORA's programs.

Australia hopes to see IORA establish a Working Group on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment to properly recognise the importance of this cross cutting issue. This, of course, is subject to agreement by IORA members, but we are nothing if not ambitious!

Australia is soon passing the women's empowerment baton to Indonesia as the next IORA chair. We look forward to working with Indonesia and other IORA members to take this agenda forward so that the seeds we have together planted in the past two years bear fruit.

Over the course of this Seychelles meeting, there are more seeds to plant.

We look forward to hearing from a diverse range of speakers in the coming two days and learning from our collective stories, efforts and wisdom. None of our countries has all the answers, but we can share what we have experienced and propagate new ideas.

I know our discussions will form a solid foundation for future work through IORA to tap into the extraordinary potential of the region's women.

Once again, I am delighted to welcome you all to this IORA Women's Economic Empowerment Event on Minister Bishop's behalf.

Thank you.