

Women and girls are key to Cambodia's future prosperity

It is a great pleasure to visit Cambodia in my capacity as Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls. Australia recognises the critical role that women and girls play in national and global prosperity and security.

My position was created to empower women in the context of Australia's engagement with the region. Women's roles are a key focus of our foreign policy and a critical part of our aid and development work.

Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, who is the first woman to hold the role of Foreign Minister in Australia, has identified that 80 per cent of all Australian development assistance, all our investments, regardless of their objectives, must address gender issues.

My focus includes; the economic empowerment of women, promoting leadership of women, and the elimination of violence against women and children.

In Phnom Penh, the Australian Embassy works closely with Cambodians towards these ends.

Yesterday, I visited a garment factory on the outskirts of Phnom Penh where Australia supports a project that is improving the health, especially the reproductive health, of this workforce of predominantly young women.

We know that the model of an open, export-orientated economy, with a flourishing private sector, in which women are equal participants, gives countries the best chance of increasing living standards.

The link between women's empowerment and prosperity is now well understood. The ILO's estimate that the Asia-Pacific region alone loses around \$47 billion a year because of limited female access to jobs and more than \$16 billion a year due to poor female education is a blunt reminder of what we all lose when inequities persist. The young women I met working in the factory are an important part of Cambodia's future prosperity and Australia's support for NGO-run factory-based infirmaries is a practical way that we can support them.

I've met impressive young activists who have been involved in educating their peers about sex and reproductive health. They are tackling the everyday issues confronting young Cambodians about their sexuality, including questions about sexual coercion within relationships. Their leadership is helping to break down dangerous perceptions, including – according to a 2009 survey – that half of respondents thought a boyfriend should not be jailed for raping his 'sweetheart'.

Today, I am pleased to be handing over a grant to a pilot project targeting violence against women and girls with disabilities, assisting them to access justice and support services. The project will assist members of the community and duty-bearers, such as local police and commune officials, to understand the vulnerability to violence of women and girls with disabilities, and to support victims in 77 villages in Kampong Speu Province.

This project is a practical response to the findings of a major Australian-government funded study, "Triple Jeopardy", which concluded that women with disabilities in Cambodia experience higher levels of controlling behaviours from partners and significantly higher levels of all forms of violence (emotional, physical and sexual) from family members, compared to other women.

I look forward to meeting with the Minister for Women's Affairs, Her Excellency Dr Ing Kantha Phavi, to discuss the Royal Government of Cambodia's strategic plan for women, Rattanak Neary, and the National Action Plan on Violence Against Women.

Australia is pleased to work with Dr Phavi on these issues, primarily through our support for the Plan on Violence Against Women.

Australia will continue to work with partners in Cambodia towards achieving our shared goal of a world where women participate equally; in political leadership, in business, in the workplace and in community life. We support a world in which women and girls have proper access to education, and to health services. And one in which women and girls live that is free from violence, and the fear of violence.

Ms Natasha Stott Despoja AM, Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls, is visiting Cambodia from 4th to 6th February.