



Speech by

**Mrs J. SHELDON**

**MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA**

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### **GENDER EQUALITY**

**Mrs SHELDON** (Caloundra—Lib) (12.19 p.m.): The advent of International Women's Day highlights the vital role women play in society. Further, it provides a focus that many women in developing countries have major hurdles of poverty and a lack of education and access to the power base of their society and governments. It is incumbent on women living in a western democracy to help our womenfolk who are less fortunate.

Australian women had a battle to be part of the democratic society, and it was not until 1902, one year after Federation, that Australian women obtained the vote. But it is telling that it took until 1943 before the first woman was elected to federal parliament. The first woman elected to the state parliament was Irene Longan in the mid-1930s. However, no other woman entered state parliament for over 30 years.

When I became the Leader of the Liberal Party in 1991, I was the first woman to lead a political party in the parliament of Queensland, and when I became the Deputy Premier and Treasurer of Queensland in 1996 it was the first time a woman had held such a position in Queensland and the first time a woman had held the position of Treasurer in any state or federal parliament.

One of the reasons that women are kept away from politics is economics. Even in the new millennium women are still a vulnerable group. The majority of the 1.5 billion people living in the world on \$1 a day or less are women. Worldwide women earn on average slightly less than 50 per cent of what men earn. Even in Australia women in many positions earn less than men, and migrant women are often exploited for their labour.

Lack of education is another reason that keeps women away from decision making institutions such as parliaments. Education enables women to take advantage of the opportunities available. It is recognised that education empowers the poor, safeguards the vulnerable and promotes economic growth and social justice. In Australia, women and girls are taking greater advantage of education facilities and are now outstripping men in their numbers in many of the university faculties.

The history of exclusion of women from politics or from positions of power and decision making in government is an ambiguity in itself. Women are frequently entrusted to manage the financial affairs of the family. They are the key contributors to economic development. For instance, in Australia women at present account for 35 per cent of the country's 1.3 million small business operators, which is an important sector of the productive society. Women continue to be victims of conflict but remain in great part absent from conflict resolution. How many women are key decision makers in the current debate about a war in Iraq?

Women can bring particular skills and perspectives to politics. Because they are carers by nature, women can be much more sensitive to minority issues. In fact, women adopt a much more constructive and less adversarial role in politics. A new study in the United States found that having women on top management teams resulted in higher earnings and greater shareholder wealth. A study by the World Bank concluded that women contribute to good governance and that 'where their influence in public life is higher, the level of corruption is lower'. However, there is still a considerable number of women operating as CEOs or on major company boards.

With the recent collapse of and lack of service delivery by many of our national companies, the presence of more decision making women can only be a positive measure and one that hopefully would deliver a more equitable outcome. Regardless of the decision making role a woman may

achieve, she still has to do a balancing act with family responsibilities and particularly with the rearing of children. It is therefore vital that governments and companies provide in-house child minding facilities and that funding maternity leave be a reality for new mothers or, indeed, fathers if they fulfil a new parenting role.

As Minister for Women's Affairs, in 1997 I introduced six weeks paid maternity leave for all public servants. This, unfortunately, is still the only government paid maternity leave in Queensland and is a factor why many capable women are leaving the work force and feel they cannot contribute to public life. Gender equality is not a concession of a male dominated world. It should be the objective of both men and women alike. Indeed, it is a natural and rightful consequence of human dignity and respect.