



AUSTRALIAN HIGH COMMISSION PRETORIA

MEDIA RELEASE

7 March 2014

Australia prioritising gender equality to promote economic growth

Australia recognises that one of the best ways to promote higher economic growth and to achieve stronger societies is through empowering women and girls.

In recognition of this, the Australian Government spends more than \$2 billion of its foreign aid budget on initiatives that have empowerment of women and girls as a principal or significant focus.

This support takes many forms, from direct business assistance to promoting higher standards of education, healthcare, and agricultural expertise. Domestic violence is also a challenge confronting women in many communities which Australia sees not only as social issue, but an economic one.

Australia's High Commissioner to South Africa, HE Mr Graeme Wilson, said that on International Women's Day (8 March), it was important to reflect on women's achievements as well as the challenges they continued to face.

"Empowering women to participate in the economy is not only the right thing to do, it is smart economics. When women are able to participate actively in the economy, including the formal labour market, the whole community prospers," he said.

Australia is building the capacity of professional women in South Africa, and across the continent, through its prestigious Australia Awards. This year, women comprised 52% of Africans selected for post-graduate study and professional development opportunities under this program. Eight women will be studying in Australia under the Australia Awards program in 2014, in various fields including agriculture and mining.

The *African Women in Leadership Network* for Australian scholarship alumni will be celebrating its first anniversary this month. The Australian Government was instrumental in setting up this network to further strengthen the leadership skills and networks of African professional women in order to expand their career prospects as they take up important leadership roles in government or the private sector.

Mr Wilson said the Australian Government had also recently appointed Ms Natasha Stott Despoja as its Ambassador for Women and Girls. Ms Stott Despoja's role focuses on women's leadership, economic empowerment and addressing violence against women, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

"Empowering women and girls means that communities can reach their full potential. This in turn means greater peace and prosperity, and greater resources and expertise to steer growth and development across Africa", Mr Wilson concluded.

For media enquiries, please contact Natalie Mendelsohn, natalie.mendelsohn@dfat.gov.au, 0834093619. For further information about Australia Awards scholarships, see www.australiaawardsafrica.org or the website of the Australian High Commission in Pretoria, www.southafrica.embassy.gov.au