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TITLE: There is much to celebrate but work still to be done

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International Women's Day is on Saturday and Australian women can be chilling the champers this year. Julia Gillard has been performing as the first female acting prime minister, and many have felt a swelling of pride in her achievement. Julie Bishop is the first female deputy leader of the opposition and very able. Therese Rein is a "First Lady" who is inspiring and successful in her own right. The Federal Cabinet rejoices in many competent (and let's face it, downright spunky) women. We have not one, but two female High Court judges. Hallelujah, Federal Parliament is finally getting a creche. These local leaps forward in leadership are mirrored globally. Hilary Clinton's US election campaign is making the leadership potential of women front page news all over the world. Former Irish president and United Nations human rights chief Mary Robinson has gathered the world's 40 female leaders together for the first time in history for the Council of Women World Leaders.

However welcome these developments are at the elite political level, they may not necessarily translate into gains for the average Australian woman. Issues like paid maternity leave and equal pay are starting to rumble down the policy mountain, gathering pace at last but not yet a reality. Women who face layers of disadvantage, such as poor women, migrant workers, indigenous women in remote communities, women with disabilities, and queer women may not notice much of a difference at all. In the spirit of national change, I nominate three wishes for progress in gender equality that the Rudd Government could deliver immediately, and which might also yield longer term benefits for all Australian women.

First, move the Office for Women back into the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. The Office for Women is the policy advisory unit that advises on a range of women's issues within the Australian public service. It used to be in PM&C, but in the Howard years was made a division of the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Is that important? Yes. When the Executive wants an issue to have a whole-of-government impact and be a priority policy issue, it goes to PM&C. PM&C is therefore getting a new Office for Work and Family, which is good, but women's concerns are much wider than that. For the same reasons, let's get the Minister for the Status of Women, currently Tanya Plibersek, back into Cabinet. Rudd is searching for a National Security Adviser, why not include a new high profile appointment to be named the National Status of Women Adviser too? Why not make 500 of the best and brightest invited to the 2020 Summit women? Cate Blanchett cannot do it all on her own. This is not "administrivia", it is about signalling the priorities of the new Government, and it ensures that problems will be tackled with energy and resources.

Secondly, continue the focus on a national response to and the public campaign against domestic violence. It is completely understandable that the Government wants to axe the excesses of government spending on advertising campaigns. The "Australia says no" interventions during the Howard government might need to be revisited, by say backing up the spartan website and helpline services. But please do not abandon a high priority national campaign about violence against women. Even better, the new Federal Government could recognise violence against women and children as a national emergency, on par with counter-terrorism measures. The resolve and resources directed towards the Northern Territory intervention could be directed at tackling these problems in every community in Australia, making the intervention based on the equal rights of all Australians to be free from personal violence.

Thirdly, the cherry on top of the International Women's Day cake this year could be for the Rudd Government to deliver on its promise to sign the Optional Protocol to the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. OK, so many Australian women will not have this top of their wish list, but if they knew the history of this long- running saga they would. This convention is the international treaty for the rights of women, much of which has been incorporated into the federal Sex Discrimination Act 1975. The Government is due to report on it this year and is calling for submissions from Australian women over the next two months. The protocol was designed to create a complaints mechanism so that individuals or groups could make a complaint to the convention committee in Geneva. The protocol was designed to put the convention in line with the other major human rights treaties like those dealing with torture or racism. Australia helped to draft the text of this protocol and promoted its accession in the region. Suddenly, in August 2000, the Howard Government decided not to sign it, and it came into force without Australia's backing. The protocol was basically a casualty in a brawl between Australia and the UN human rights treaty system, caused by a fit of pique over adverse comments made to then minister Ruddock by the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination over asylum-seeker and indigenous issues. The Rudd Government has already promised that they would sign the protocol. This will be another signal, this time to the world, that Australia takes the human rights of women seriously. The impetus of a UN Committee monitoring complaints might also keep us focused on the needs of the most marginalised women and girls in Australia. These three wishes would be gifts to our nation's future and would be worth celebrating this Saturday.