

STATEMENT BY AUSTRALIAN AMBASSADOR FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS, NATASHA STOTT DESPOJA AM

FRED HOLLOWES FOUNDATION/BURNET INSTITUTE SIDE EVENT - WOMEN DELIVER

“OLDER WOMEN DELIVER TOO”

I commend the Fred Hollowes Foundation, the Burnet Institute and HelpAge International on organising this event, promoting the visibility of older women and their important role in delivering women’s and children’s health.

Older women make a vital contribution to reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health. Grandmothers support mothers during pregnancy, care for newborns, maintain cultural traditions surrounding pregnancy and childbirth, and advise and educate younger women on all aspects of family wellbeing. Older women are also often caregivers of children or sick relatives, particularly in families affected by migration, displacement or illness. Yet many development programs fail to explicitly involve older women and health systems are often unresponsive to the needs of older women.

While both older men and women may face age discrimination, the cumulative effects of gender discrimination throughout women’s lives, including less access to education and health services, lower earning capacity and restrictions on land ownership, magnify women’s vulnerability in older age. A combination of age and sex discrimination also puts older women at increased risk of violence and abuse.

Although, on average, women live longer than men, they are also likely to live more years in ill health. Multiple pregnancies and inadequate support in childbirth, as well as inequalities earlier in life, contribute to health problems in older age. Older women also face specific age-related health issues.

One of the most common, yet treatable, disabilities among older women is vision impairment. Global evidence shows that women are 1.5 times more likely to be affected by vision loss than men, and they are less likely to access cataract surgery or have spectacles.

Chronic illness and disability restrict older women’s capacity to contribute to their families and communities. When older people become dependent, the burden of care falls on family members, usually women or girls.

Australia’s *Health for Development Strategy 2015-2020* is working to deliver country-level systems and services that are responsive to people’s health needs. We are focusing our efforts to support the most vulnerable populations and lowest income-groups. Among these groups, the greatest health security risks lie and the greatest gains can be made. This includes

addressing the financial, social, and cultural barriers for women, children, poor people and people with a disability, to access essential health services. A priority is to empower communities to demand better health services to address a women's lack of decision-making power at household and community levels.

A quarter of the world's women are over 50. We must recognise their roles and rights, and provide the foundation for these rights to be realised. Empowering older women and acknowledging their contributions in both the family and the community are central to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

I encourage participants at this event to develop new, productive partnerships, including with the Women Deliver community, to promote the interests of older women.

Natasha Stott Despoja AM
Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls