

## CHAPTER 11

# Why we need commitment to gender equity

*Australia has come a long way but sometimes it seems as if things have stalled — or gone backwards — which is why it's time to jump start a commitment to equality and economic security for women and girls.*

The choices people make and the unexpected events that can occur have different consequences because resources are unequally shared and choices are constrained. Events such as having a child, acquiring a disability or illness, or experiencing family violence or relationship breakdown can compound existing inequalities, casting long and deep shadows across women's lives. These experiences differ for different women, and can have different consequences for women who face other inequalities and discrimina-

tion relating to factors such as race/ethnicity and disability.

As new generations of girls and women encounter sexism and constrained choices, we need not only to point out the progress that has been made, but also to highlight what has to be done next. The rights and opportunities women have gained are the result of long and hard-fought struggles, and we owe it to ourselves, the women who came before us and those who come after us to continue to argue for the rights of women and girls. Increasingly there is a commitment for women and men to work together for gender equity — not only for the personal economic and social benefits, but also because, as Amartya Sen points out, greater gender equity contributes to a decent society for all of us.<sup>154</sup>

It is clear that there are still many areas of Australian life where women — and especially mothers — experience serious disadvantage that can affect their finances, their health and wellbeing, and their quality of life. BSL researchers Meg Montague and Jenny Stephens observed in the 1980s that poverty is a real threat for all women and girls because of the persistence of gender structures that shape opportunity and economic security, and this remains true in the 21st century. Women are seriously under-represented in all forms of public life, from politics to business, but continue to perform the bulk of care and other non-market activity. As a result, women are

underpaid relative to men and accrue less lifetime capital in the form of superannuation and other benefits. Women are still subject to high levels of violence, primarily perpetrated by men. We have come a long way but sometimes it seems as if things have stalled — or gone backwards — which is why it is time to jump start a commitment to equality and economic security for women and girls in Australia.